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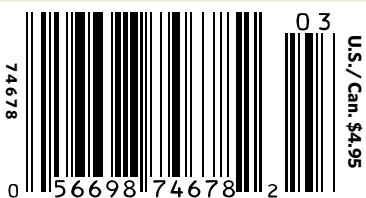


HOW TO HANDLE A POWER-HUNGRY NARCISSIST

Tips from the book of Daniel,
by WILLIAM BARBER II

PLUS:

The politics of Revelation
A new day in Zimbabwe?
The heresy of individualism





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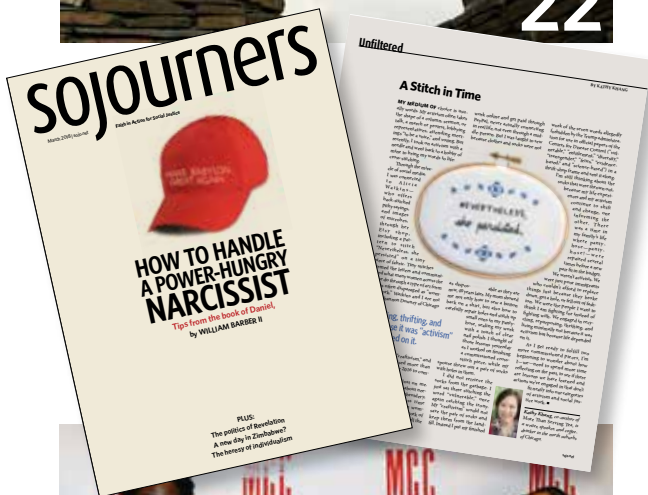
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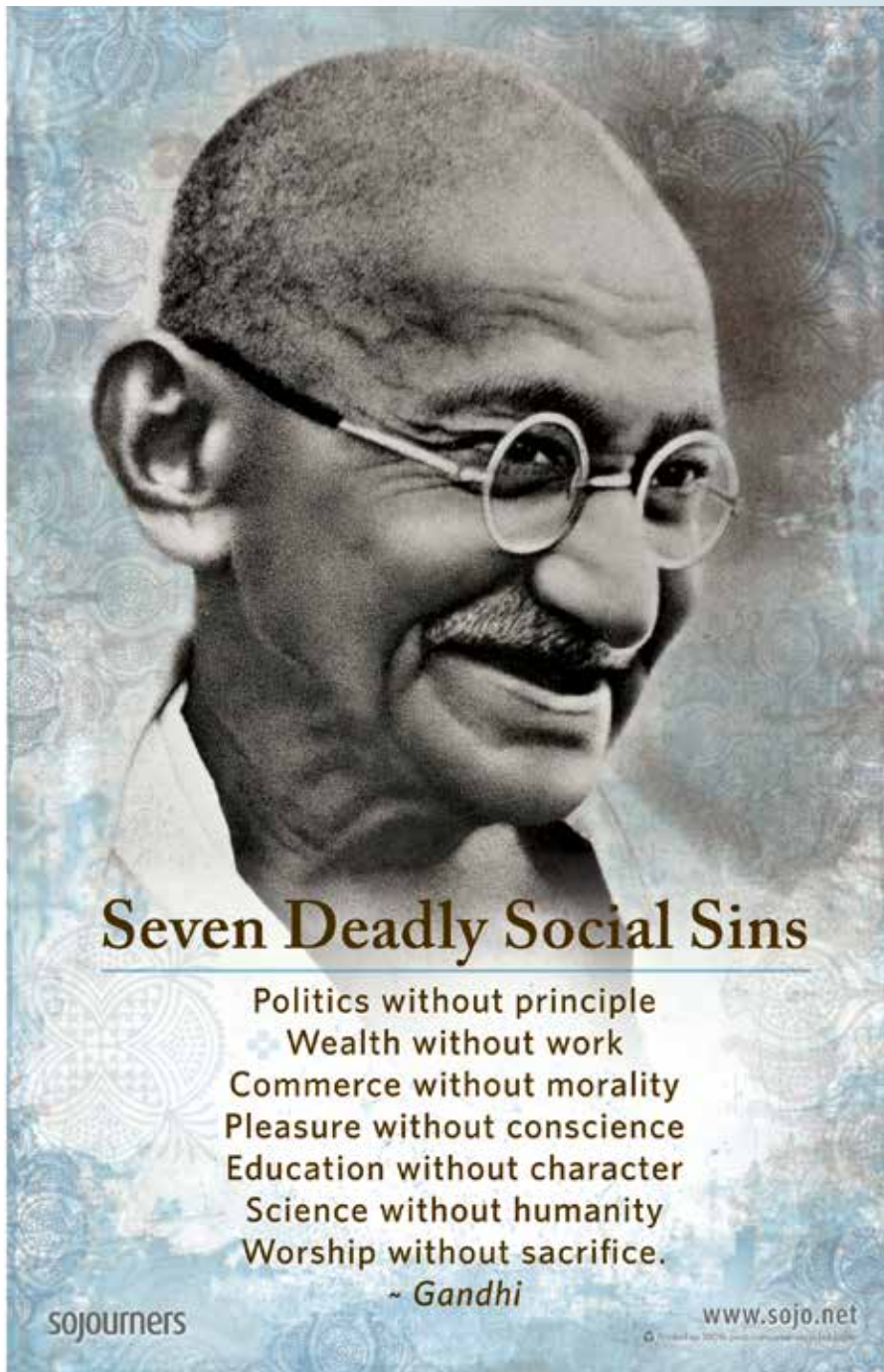
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“DRAMATIC, POLITICAL, incendiary.” They seem like words you’d see splashed across the dust jacket of *Fire and Fury*, the controversial account of the Trump White House that generated a firestorm of presidential tweets when it was released earlier this year. But in this issue, Bible scholar Reta Haltzman Finger uses those words to describe an older form of political drama: the book of Revelation.

Despite Revelation’s reputation as a har-binger of doom, Finger explains that the final book in the New Testament needs to be understood as an example of apocalyptic resistance literature, a genre of writing originally “intended to bring hope during times of political uncertainty or persecution.” This hope isn’t rooted in imperial acts

of violence; it’s rooted in the victory of the Lamb, slaughtered but resurrected.

Lately we’ve been hearing a lot about how we are living in “unprecedented” times. And when President Trump so easily threatens nuclear attacks and uses vile language to disparage other countries, it seems possible that our nation has indeed slunk into a dangerous new era.

Yet as the Bible reminds us, we are certainly not the first nation to grapple with a leader whose only regard is for himself. In our cover story, Rev. Dr. William Barber II tells the tale of King Nebuchadnezzar and the three Hebrew boys—Shadrach,



Meshach, and Abednego—who refused to worship him. According to Barber, it’s a tale about a “narcissistic maniac” who “put gold on his tower” and “promised that he, and only he, could make Babylon great again.”

Barber writes: “They could not accept the religion of the king, the religion of greed, the religion of racism, the religion of hate. They knew that there are times you must stand your ground because bowing down is not an option.”

The challenges of 2018 may be unique, yet—as Christians enter the season of Lent—we pray, fast, give alms, and do justice. That, as always, is what the Lord requires. ■

Letters

A Prophetic Exchange

“How God Intervenes” (January 2018), with Kenyatta Gilbert and Walter Brueggemann, is a wonderful interview. How blessed we are to have these two wise and articulate prophets among us. There is so much insight in their challenging and inspiring exchange.

Joan O’Brien

Wethersfield, Connecticut

The First Evangelizer

Heartfelt thanks for publishing Lou Ella Hickman’s “Anna, the First Evangelizer” (January 2018). I cannot express how much I appreciate Lou Ella’s Spirit-filled words. This poem and all her work is full of grace and truth. We have long known of Simeon’s faith, and now we better know Anna as a prophet and, as the poet-scholar has named her, “the first evangelizer.” Thanks be to God.

Elizabeth Whitlow

Austin, Texas

I Can See Death Panels from My House

Ed Spivey Jr., I’m sorry for your cold, but what the heck did you mean by “Obama’s Death Panels” in your column “Dog Days (plus cat)” (January 2018)? How could you forget that they were Sarah Palin’s total invention, a lie aimed at turning an election? Your mistake in *Sojourners* might

The country needs us to think straight.

rouse old ideas in folks whom *Sojourners* hopes to enlighten. The country needs us to think straight, which is hard enough to do without bringing up old rabble-rousing falsehoods. Anyway, thanks for your good work up to when you got that mind-bending cold. I hope you are feeling and thinking better.

Lilyan Snow

Seattle, Washington

The humor column H’rumpfs often contains satirical references. Author Ed Spivey Jr. explains: “It’s kind of like Opposite Day, but with words.”—The Editors

Purdue Pharma’s Scourge

In his column in the December 2017 issue, Jim Wallis encourages readers to offer “A Prayer for the Soul of the Nation.” Then Heidi Thompson states in her article “Lord, When Did We See You Addicted” (December 2017) that the opioid epidemic is “a spiritual catastrophe” and a “public health crisis.” More than prayer is needed for this epidemic in the making. People should read *The New Yorker’s* article “The Family That Built an Empire of Pain.” They would soon realize that America has not only a spiritual

catastrophe but also a moral crisis. The article examines the Sackler family and their development of OxyContin through their privately held company, Purdue Pharma. They are knowingly manufacturing and selling addictive drugs, fueling a situation that may take more lives than the HIV/AIDS crisis. Urge the Sacklers to point their moral compass to true north by banishing their manufacture and sale of this scourge.

Rich Dykstra

Ludington, Michigan

Keeping Hope Alive

I am afraid, angry, bewildered, and clinging to shrinking hope. The violent wind of injustice screams while the waves of moral destruction crash around us. In disbelief and desperation, I shout, “God, don’t you care that we are perishing?” Jim Wallis and all at *Sojourners*, you help keep my waning hope alive. Thank you.

Dale Morris Lee

Denver, Colorado

Your name here! Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, *Sojourners*, 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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LOUISVILLE SEMINARY

BY JIM WALLIS

Time for a 'Moral Movement'



I FEEL POLITICALLY homeless as we enter 2018, and I know I am not alone. Many are feeling the same, as other Christians, especially white evangelicals, have offered uncritical support for a president who is the antithesis of the gospel of Jesus Christ, endangering the witness and reputation of Christianity, especially among the younger generation.

Of course, the two political parties are not morally equivalent. But the Republican Party's political sellout to Donald Trump and the Democrats' lack of a clear moral alternative that many people of faith are excited to support leave many of us feeling politically homeless.

Republican leadership has sold its party's soul to an amoral, childish, and dangerous man. He has been revealed as intellectually shal-

low, a person who lacks a moral conscience, and an unapologetic promoter of racial bigotry and misogyny. His disrespect for the rule of law and our political system of checks and balances can best be described as narcissistic and authoritarian paranoia, which creates a dangerous threat to American democracy and national security.

genuine pro-family values, national security through global engagement, a commitment to opportunity for all and empathy for those in need, and the worth and equality of every person under the law.

And while morally it hasn't fallen to the same level, the Democratic Party also seems to have lost its way. Democratic rhetoric of late doesn't appeal to the values of many Christians who care most about poverty and racism. For many election cycles, many Democrats have replaced the word "poor" with the words "middle class," and the party is no longer perceived as one that cares enough about the needs of people on the margins of life in America. The text from Matthew 25 that draws many Christians into engaging in politics does not say, "As you have done to the middle class, you have done to me."

Despite being dependent on African-American voters, the Democratic Party has often taken them for granted, instead of courageously addressing the realities of institutionalized racism and investing in organizers and candidates in African-American and Latinx communities.

Unfortunately, it feels as if the Democratic Party is no longer a faith-friendly party. Voters with religious faith are often ignored or dismissed without serious outreach or respectful dialogue. I have fought religious fundamentalism for most of my life, but the secular fundamentalism of much of the left and the national Democratic Party can be equally ideological and divisive, too often seeming to attack religion itself.

Moral issues of intrinsic concern to the faith community are often disregarded or disrespected by Democratic Party orthodoxy, which often takes extreme or overly strident views on issues such as abortion. Many of us in the faith community

regard abortion as a moral issue and part of a consistent ethic of life and dignity. While many of us pro-life Christians don't support the criminalization of often desperate and tragic choices, we find far too many Democrats in 2018 reluctant to say that reducing abortion is a moral and desirable policy goal. There's a bitter irony here, because many public policies promoted by Democrats—such as supporting women with health care, nutrition, and social services—do in fact reduce the demand for abortion. And yet, in 2018, Democratic leadership seems allergic to making that link explicit.

Similarly, the central importance of marriage, family, and parenting for the common good of society is not a central topic in Democratic Party language, even as the party supports family friendly policies such as paid family leave, higher wages for working families, daycare, and education. Why is the discussion of family values—among every type of family—so absent from conversations on the left when we know it is a part of critical solutions to issues of poverty?

With part of the Christian community putting faith at risk by their idolatrous support of Donald Trump, and other Christians feeling alienated by the other party's dismissal of faith and the moral questions it raises, our nation's moral discourse is in serious trouble.

Perhaps a third way—or better yet, a "moral movement"—to revive and renew American politics, on both sides of the aisle, is the way forward for people of faith who put the poor and vulnerable, the consistent dignity of human life, strong families and gender equality, and the priority of racial and economic justice and peace at the center of their political convictions. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

Our nation's moral and political discourse is in serious trouble.



The city of Hiroshima, Japan, was destroyed when the U.S. dropped the world's first nuclear weapon.

AFP/Getty

By Tom Z. Collina

Trump's Nuclear Twilight Zone

Here's a relatively simple step to limit an "unstable, volatile" president's nuclear options.

IN A HISTORIC STATEMENT last November, Pope Francis categorically condemned not only "the threat" of nuclear weapons but also "their very possession." In December, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons for its work on a new global treaty to prohibit nuclear arms. Already approved by the United Nations, it's expected to enter into force this year. The Vatican was one of the first to ratify.

Here in the United States, however, it's like we live in the Twilight Zone. President Donald Trump threatens to "totally destroy North Korea," tweets about how his "nuclear button" is bigger than Kim Jong Un's, and is moving ahead with plans to spend \$1.7 *trillion* to rebuild the nuclear arsenal over the next three decades.

Trump's bombastic rhetoric and

impulsive tweets worry Democrats and Republicans alike, with Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) saying in October, "We could be heading toward World War III with the kinds of comments that he's making." In a sign of growing concern, the GOP-controlled Senate held the first con-

It's time to retire the country's ICBMs.

gressional hearing on the president's authority to launch nuclear weapons in 41 years. Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) said Americans are concerned that President Trump "is so unstable, is so volatile" that he might order a nuclear strike that is "wildly out of step" with our national security interests.

Yet there is a relatively simple step the United States could take that would 1) limit President Trump's nuclear options, 2)

reduce the risk of war, 3) respond to growing international calls to eliminate atomic arms, and 4) save a boatload of money.

It is time to retire our Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs).

The United States keeps hundreds of nuclear-tipped ICBMs in five states in the West and Midwest. Each missile carries a nuclear payload many times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb, capable of killing

hundreds of thousands of people. The Pentagon is now planning to build a new, deadlier generation of these missiles, which are housed in underground silos.

But these ICBMs are not meant to be launched—not even in a nuclear war. Their main purpose is to "absorb" a nuclear attack from Russia, acting as a giant "nuclear sponge." They are designed to be destroyed in the ground, along with all the people that live anywhere near them. Such is the

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twisted logic of atomic warfare.

It never made sense to draw a nuclear attack toward the United States, rather than away from it. Even during the Cold War, analysts challenged this plan, claiming it was “madness to use United States real estate as ‘a great sponge to absorb’ Soviet nuclear weapons,” as Navy captain and strategic analyst Dominic Paolucci put it in the late 1970s.

The nuclear sponge is still with us, and now the Trump administration is planning to spend about \$150 billion to double down and do it all over again.

That is, unless we stand up and say “no,” beginning with the good people of Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. These states, and the entire country, would be better off if we did not have these weapons at all (we

would still have 1,000 nukes on submarines and bombers). The “sponge states” could start by declaring that in five years they will no longer agree to host the weapons. The states could use that time to develop economic conversion plans to replace lost jobs with new ones. It is highly unlikely that any other state would offer to host the missiles, so this could be a step toward relegating them to the dustbin of history.

These five states, and the people who live there, have a larger nuclear target on their backs than other states, but these weapons endanger us all. Now is the time to get rid of ICBMs and throw away the “nuclear sponge.” ■

Tom Z. Collina is policy director at Ploughshares Fund in Washington, D.C.

By Christina Colón

Beware of Greeks...

How did sororities and fraternities go from service to sociopathy?

“IS GREEK LIFE Worth Saving?” asked a recent *U.S. News & World Report* article. It’s a question others are asking since Indiana University became the seventh university to suspend the activities of its fraternities and sororities. Four deaths in a year attributed to the fraternity pledge process are a clear sign that “Greek life” has a problem.

Yet fraternities aren’t going away. In fact, journalist John Hechinger estimates that at least 380,000 male undergraduates belong to Greek-letter organizations, a 50 percent increase over the last decade. And while millennials are flocking to Greek life, even more are abandoning the church.

A 2015 Pew study found that only 27 percent of millennials attend a religious service on a weekly basis. It’s something college Christian organizations are noticing, and why InterVarsity now sponsors “Greek InterVarsity,” purporting that one can be both “Greek” and Christian.

It’s an interesting approach. However, considering these deaths—and the numerous sexual assault allegations made

against fraternity men—some wonder if InterVarsity is making the right decision. It’s time to ask how people of faith can effectively combat the toxic behaviors—prejudice, misogyny, and addiction—that are allowed to flourish within the Greek college and university systems.

Christians first must recognize these same sins in our own Christian communities. The church has the potential to shape attitudes toward sexual assault, gender violence, and toxic masculinity. Unfortunately, 65 percent of pastors have spoken once or never about domestic and sexual violence. I can’t remember my campus ministry discussing the topic ever.

My sorority did, though. As part of my membership, I was required to attend talks on sexual assault, alcohol awareness, and bystander intervention. Some Greek organizations have even begun addressing the issue at a national level. In 2015, the sorority Alpha Delta Pi and the fraternity Sigma Phi Epsilon partnered to create #LiveYourOath, a program that requires members of the organizations

Millennials are flocking to Greek life and away from church.

From the Archives

March-April 1995

A Right-Wing God?

MANY politically conservative evangelical Christians have been not too subtly transforming God into a transcendental member of the right wing of the Republican Party. It is not just a matter of their making a biblical case for their political agenda; they seem to be going further than that. They are giving the impression that anyone who disagrees with their agenda is outside the will of God. These people have been so effective in associating evangelical Christianity with right-wing Republicanism that to the secular press the word “evangelical” has come to mean the Christian Coalition.

This recent development has generated great consternation among many of us who, over the last few decades, have used the word “evangelical” to establish our own religious identity. We now have to ask, Can we continue to use that title? We hold to the orthodox theology of evangelicalism, but we are not about to buy into all the values and programs espoused by the Religious Right. ...

I am convinced that there are many who have called themselves evangelicals, both inside and outside of mainline denominations, who ... are looking for a clear-cut alternative. They want a vision for the church that combines theologically sound evangelism with a bold and dynamic social initiative. They want a Christianity that is viable for the 21st century. ■

Tony Campolo was founder of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education when this article appeared.



to have conversations about sexual assault and to understand campus policies around alcohol, Title IX, and sexual consent. Additionally, Sigma Phi Epsilon decided in November to ban alcohol and all illegal substances from its chapter houses.

While Christian ministries can and should be participating in and supporting these efforts, it's also imperative that we advocate for a system of accountability on campuses. This will ensure that groups that haze and commit assault are prosecuted and disbanded.

Greek organizations are not the only campus groups that foster situations of violence. In October 2014, a former member of the Florida A&M marching band was found guilty of manslaughter and “felony hazing.” Last September, five football players at evangelical Wheaton College in Illinois were charged with a series of felonies

in conjunction with a 2016 hazing incident.

First Corinthians says that we are the “body of Christ” and “individually members of it” (12:27). As people of faith determine how to respond to the Greek system, we might keep this verse in mind. When we talk about dismantling the Greek system, we should not characterize it as an unequivocally bad entity. People turn to Greek life for good reasons, including those who seek community in unfamiliar academic settings.

Christians are to be known by their love. By building and fostering inclusive and healthy communities, we can make the natural need for one another into a redeeming and transformative experience—and offer this as our witness and model to others. ■

Christina Colón is an editorial assistant of Sojourners.

By Nontando Hadebe

Can These Dry Bones Live?

A cry for hope amid dramatic changes in Zimbabwe.

I WAS BORN IN Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe. Though I now teach and reside in South Africa, my family members still live in various parts of Zimbabwe. In November, I watched as scenes unfolded during a suspenseful week of regime change. A military intervention no one would have predicted set the stage for the resignation of Zimbabwe's 37-year dictator, Robert Mugabe. Emmerson Mnangagwa became president and will serve out Mugabe's term.

I was captivated by ordinary citizens' spontaneous expressions of joy as they took to the streets and expressed their views for the first time without fear of reprisal. Every news station hosted political analysts, church leaders, and members of civil society engaged in rigorous debate on the meaning and impact of the momentous political and economic shifts. They focused on the potential impact on those who have borne the brunt of the economic crisis under Mugabe—which included shortages of money (which made financial transactions a logistical nightmare), widespread corruption, political repression,

exceptionally high levels of unemployment, and the looting of profits from the country's natural resources.

These vibrant debates spilled over to public spaces. People spoke freely about their views and hopes for a new Zimbabwe. Is change possible, since Mnangagwa is a member of the same political party that supported Mugabe and is associated with some of the worst atrocities committed during that party's reign?

Zimbabweans asked, “Can these dry bones live?” Can this party bring life to Zimbabwe in ways that are different from its track record? Where can we look for models of such change?

One example, from neighboring South Africa, brings a flicker of hope. More than 20 years ago, F.W. de Klerk, president of the ruling National Party of South Africa that was responsible for racial apartheid, surprised the world by enacting radical reforms in 1989 that led to the release of anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela. De Klerk's actions set in motion events that led to the release of political prisoners, the first democratic elections, and Mandela's

election as South Africa's first black president. Many other forces also contributed to these changes, including liberation movements and international pressure, but one cannot ignore the role played by de Klerk in the dramatic shifts in South Africa's political, economic, and social landscape. The "dry bones" flickered into life.

Only time will tell whether similar changes will happen in Zimbabwe. One hopeful shift is the vibrant conversation about moving from hero-worship and leader-idolization to a focus on the constitution that enables citizens to hold leaders

New president, same old party.

accountable. The constitutional values that guarantee freedom, democracy, human rights, accountability, terms of office, and an independent judiciary must be at the center of Zimbabwe's political life if history is not to repeat itself. An African proverb describes this aptly: "Don't look where you fell but where you slipped."

Churches have an important role to play in supporting the constitutional rule of law. But churches have an additional point of reference that requires them to take a prophetic and preferential option for the poor, marginalized, and excluded. Nations are judged by how they treat those who are most vulnerable. This can be extended to the role of religions in any country. Are they self-absorbed and defending their own interests or are they serving the most marginalized as a reference point for their allegiance to the faith?

The mission Jesus laid out guides churches in every era: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor and to set the captives free. As in South Africa, social movements for liberation, strong leadership from the churches, and unexpected conversions will be needed for a new Zimbabwe. ■

Nontando Hadebe is a senior lecturer at St. Augustine University in Johannesburg, South Africa, a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and a former Sojourners intern.

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VIDEO



JP Keenan

Lent Goes Public

"Ashes to Go" may sound like the antithesis of Lenten somberness, but for some churches it's an important way to meet people where they are. "The most meaningful encounter" when doing Ashes to Go is often "that one person or couple of people who have been turned away from the church," says Rev. Elizabeth Gardner in a video at sojo.net. "It's very intimate, and yet in a hugely public setting, to say 'God loves you.'" See more thought-provoking videos at sojo.net/video.

QUOTED

“Peacemaking isn't a passive withdrawal from conflict—it's an intentional movement toward it.”

—Jon Huckins
on Trump's decision to move
the U.S. embassy in Israel
sojo.net/embassy

NEWS



Alicia Baker

Family photo

Meet the Seminary Grad Suing the Trump Administration

Before her wedding, Alicia Baker and her now-husband agreed they wanted to wait to have kids. She had a non-hormonal, copper IUD inserted, and thought nothing else of it.

But "a few days before the wedding, Baker says she was notified her insurance would be paying neither the cost of the IUD nor the cost of the doctor's visit—leaving her with a \$1,200 bill," reported Hannah Critchfield on sojo.net. "Since her employer health plan promised complete coverage of all non-abortion-inducing contraceptives, she reached out through her HR department to find out why. Baker's employer-provided insurance company, GuideStone Financial Services, an evangelical Christian agency, responded by stating that they would not cover the service. Baker says the agency pointed to its objection to abortion-inducing medications, essentially lumping [IUDs] in with abortifacients instead of contraception."

Baker, who is a Christian and a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary, is now suing the Trump administration for issuing two rules in October 2017 that allow employers with religious or moral objections to deny women insurance coverage for contraception.

"I see this as an opportunity for the church in general to recognize that this is not an 'us' vs. 'them' issue," said Baker. "This is a human issue, and women from all backgrounds—including people that are probably sitting next to you in church—this is something that they have to deal with."

Read more at sojo.net/baker.

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A Stitch in Time

MY MEDIUM OF choice is usually words. My activism often takes the shape of a column, sermon, or talk, a march or protest, lobbying representatives, attending meetings “to be a voice,” and voting. But recently, I took on activism with a needle and went back to a hobby of mine to bring my words to life: cross-stitching.

Through the miracle of social media, I was connected to Alicia Watkins—who offers back-stitched pithy sayings, and images of microbes, through her Etsy shop, including a pattern to stitch “Nevertheless, she persisted” on a tiny piece of fabric. Tiny stitches formed the letters and communicated what many women across the globe do, through a type of art form that is often disparaged as “women’s work.” Watkins and I are not alone. Shannon Downey of Chicago

work online and get paid through PayPal, never actually connecting in real life, not even through a middle-person. But I was taught to sew because clothes and socks were

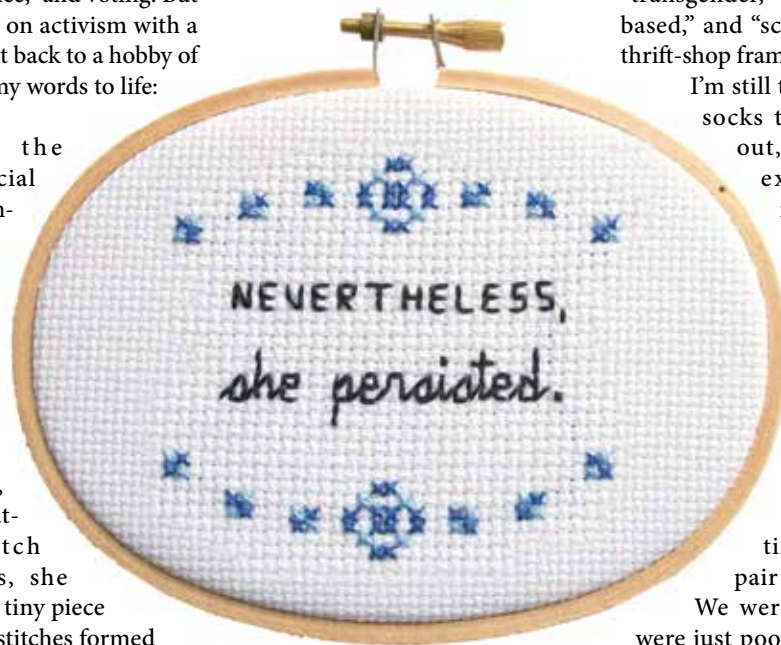
work of the seven words allegedly forbidden by the Trump administration for use in official papers of the Centers for Disease Control (“vulnerable,” “entitlement,” “diversity,” “transgender,” “fetus,” “evidence-based,” and “science-based”) in a thrift-shop frame and sent it along.

I’m still thinking about the socks that were thrown out, because my life experiences and my activism continue to shift and change, one informing the other. There was a time in my family’s life when pantyhose—panty-hose!—were repaired several times before a new pair fit in the budget.

We weren’t activists. We were just poor immigrants who couldn’t afford to replace things just because they broke down, got a hole, or fell out of fashion. We were the people I want to think I am fighting for instead of fighting with. We engaged in recycling, repurposing, thrifting, and living minimally not because it was activism but because life depended on it.

As I get ready to fulfill two more commissioned pieces, I’m beginning to wonder about how I—we—need to spend more time reflecting on the past, to see if there are lessons we have learned and actions we’ve engaged in that don’t fit neatly into our categories of activism and social justice work. ■

Kathy Khang, co-author of More Than Serving Tea, is a writer, speaker, and coffee-drinker in the north suburbs of Chicago.



not as disposable as they are now, 40 years later. My mom showed me not only how to sew a button back on a shirt, but also how to carefully repair holes and stitch up small runs in my pantyhose, sealing my work with a touch of clear nail polish. I thought of those lessons yesterday as I worked on finishing a commissioned cross-stitch

piece, while my spouse threw out a pair of socks with holes in them.

I did not retrieve the socks from the garbage. I just sat there stitching the word “vulnerable,” once again catching the irony. My “craftivism” would not save the pair of socks and keep them from the landfill. Instead I put my finished



We engaged in recycling, thrifting, and living simply—not because it was “activism” but because life depended on it.

calls the activity “craftivism,” and through it she raised more than \$5,000 in November 2016 to combat gun violence.

The irony is not lost on me. It’s actually what I love about needlework. Textile art, embroidery, sewing, darning—across time and space they have been women’s work, girls’ work, the work of the poor. Nowadays we can sell the

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THE LINE

Poverty in America | It's not what you think.



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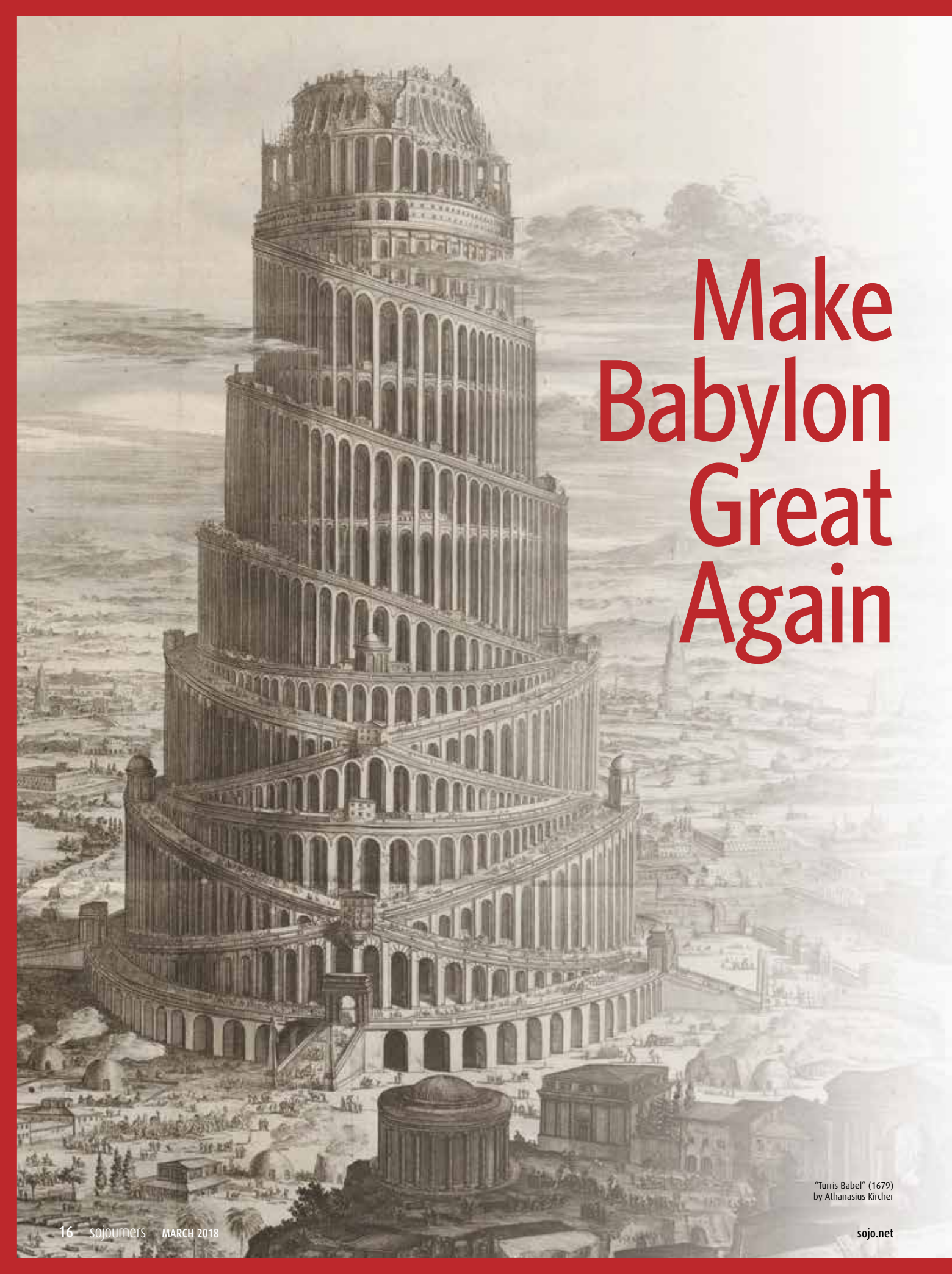
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An engraving of the Tower of Babel, a massive, spiraling structure with many levels of arches and windows, rising from a city. The tower is depicted as a series of concentric, spiraling bands of arches, each level more densely packed than the one below. The city at its base is a detailed, sprawling metropolis with various buildings, streets, and a river. The sky is filled with clouds. The overall style is that of a 17th-century engraving.

Make Babylon Great Again

"Turris Babel" (1679)
by Athanasius Kircher

Nebuchadnezzar was a narcissistic maniac who would do anything to retain power. Tips from the book of Daniel for dealing with a tyrant • by WILLIAM BARBER II

In the book of Daniel, you find the words, “Can the God you serve deliver you?” Here’s the truth: The God we serve can deliver. But even if not, we will never bow down and serve other gods.

Daniel, set during the Babylonian exile, has something to say about history. It explores the vulnerability of people living under oppression. Many of the Israelites found themselves in bondage in Babylon.

There was a king of Babylon named Nebuchadnezzar. He was a mighty king, and when he issued an order, he meant business. Nebuchadnezzar was a narcissistic maniac who made everything about *him*. He made a golden tower, and he ordered that everybody under the reign of his kingship had to bow.



One day, Nebuchadnezzar called in those he had appointed and the ones he had pardoned, the governors and the sheriffs. He had a dedicatory service for his golden image, and he was trying to make sure that he wouldn’t have to lie about those who attended his inauguration.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, three young Hebrew men, represent the choices faced by those who must either support a repressive regime or face certain death. Nebuchadnezzar wanted them to bow—forget their heritage, forget their legacy, forget their journey, forget their God, forget their rights, and bow down. He wanted everyone around him to feel less than him, because he had his own inferiority complex.

The name Nebuchadnezzar literally means “one who will do anything to protect his power.” That’s why Nebuchadnezzar built his towers. He built his tower more than 10 stories tall. Nebuchadnezzar put his name on his tower.

Reuters

Shadrach,
Meshach,
and Abednego
refused to
accept the
religion of the
king, the religion
of greed, racism,
and hate.

Everything he built, he put his name on it, because he was a narcissistic maniac. And then he put gold on his tower, and he promised that he, and only he, could make Babylon great again.

Nebuchadnezzar believed only he could save the people. He didn't believe in God, he didn't ask for help, he didn't repent, he didn't ask for forgiveness; whatever he wanted to do, he thought he could do it. Whatever he wanted to do to other nations, he thought he could do it. Whatever he wanted to do to women, he thought he could do it. Whatever he wanted to do to his opponents, he thought he could do it. He felt like it was all right because all that mattered was protecting his power, protecting his crown, and people coming and bowing down.

He said, if you want a job, come to my tower and bow down. If you want protection, come to my tower and bow down. If you want money, come to my tower.

This was not merely an act of respect toward the king; he wanted worship. And three young Hebrew boys, millennials who had gone to a HHCU (Historically Hebrew College and University) that had taught them who and whose they were, found this to be something they would not do, even with the penalty of death. His false prophets did it, those who wanted positions did it, those who didn't support him but felt like they just had to do it to negotiate did it.

But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down at the tower. They could not accept the religion of the king, the religion of greed, the religion of racism, the religion of hate. They could not go through the motions of bowing to the statue while still maintaining their belief in God. They knew that there are times you must stand your ground because bowing down is not an option.

When you know God, you can't bow down

Nebuchadnezzar's towers are big now, and Nebuchadnezzar is crazy. Nebuchadnezzar will use his power; his money is real and plentiful. He is tied to mean-spirited autocrats across the world. But this story teaches us that, even with all of that, when you know God, you can't bow. We have to be faithful even unto death.

Right now, we need this word in our political reality. This is a political text. It is a text about the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, between the high and mighty and the least of these. We need to hear it again because we're living in a time with people and political systems and personalities who are absorbed with themselves.

And it's not just one person. That one person is a symptom of a larger moral malady of greed and avarice and the craving for power. It's not just about a president, it's about an entire web of money and influence that has been working to tie up American democracy forever,



even as the divide between the rich and the poor is at its widest in our nation's history. Our electorate is growing more diverse. Wealthy oligarchs know they cannot hold on to power in truly democratic elections, so we are witnessing an all-out assault of the statutes—not the statues, but the statutes—of white supremacy and white nationalism.

This is not simply about the preservation of a government conceived by human beings. We're talking, fundamentally, about the well-being of creation and the survival of those creatures who bear the very image of God.

We live in a moment when millions desperately need a government and a society with a heart. Millions of Americans need health care and living wages and protection from xenophobia, homophobia, systemic racism, religious bigotry, immigration resentment, and climate destruction. This moment we're in is about whether a government of the people and by the people will, in fact, serve the people. It is about whether we as a people can reconstruct the heart of our democracy.

I hope the change comes. I hope hearts are changed. But the Bible says what comes out of your mouth is a reflection of your heart. Somehow we've got to get it in our spirit. Even if it doesn't, this text says we must stand our ground because bowing down is not an option.

Nebuchadnezzar lives

A century ago, Woodrow Wilson played *Birth of a Nation*, which glorified the Klan, in the Oval Office. Now, 100 years later, a new leader brings white supremacy right into the Oval Office again. In a moment like this, bowing down is not an option.

Politicians and preachers say they are against the hatred and death that happened in Charlottesville, caused by white nationalism and white supremacy, but every day on Capitol Hill they support the agenda and the policies of white supremacy and white nationalism. They refuse to fully restore the Voting Rights Act. They confirm an attorney general who wants to roll back affirmative action and refuses to address voter suppression. They pass policies that attack Latino immigrants and Muslims and the LGBT community. All of those things are the policies of white nationalism. Just because you renounce extreme hate, it doesn't mean you renounce white nationalism or white supremacy. In such a moment of moral confusion, bowing down is not an option.

Politicians, with insurance paid for by the people, try to take health care from millions of Americans. The last time we saw that kind of program eradicated was in 1866, when the Freedmen's Bureau hospitals—which served poor whites, free blacks, and former slaves—were closed. Do you know what the rationale was in 1866 for closing the hospitals? One, we need to cut

taxes. Two, the folks that are getting sick, they're sick because of their own personal morality. And three, why would we keep people alive that might vote against us if they live?

When that is going on, bowing down is not an option.

We live in a country where 250,000 people die from poverty every year. According to the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, more than 45 percent of black children are poor; 54 percent of African Americans make less than a living wage. Here we are, 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and we have 400 families in this country that make \$95,000 *an hour* while we are locking people up who simply want \$15 an hour and a union. Bowing down is not an option.

When government decisions and corporate greed poison and weaponize water and air from the Rio Grande to the rivers of Flint, Mich., we can't bow down.

Voter suppression is alive and well. Racist gerrymandering has allowed people to win offices through racial cheating, and then they use that power to hurt the very poor whites that voted for them. Twenty-two states have passed voter suppression since 2010, and the same states that passed voter suppression have the poorest people and are the least likely to have a living wage and health care and have the most attacks on immigrants and the LGBT community. We have less voting rights today than we had 50 years ago.

The attack on voting is theologically wrong. You have the right to vote if you are 18 years old and a U.S. citizen—a human being, a creation of God. When you deny my right to vote, you are denying the *imago dei* in me.

Saving in the fire

The Bible says in Isaiah 10: "Woe unto those who legislate evil and rob the poor of their rights and make women and children their prey." As long as this is our reality, bowing down is not an option.

Our deepest values are not Republican or Democrat. They are not left or right. They are moral issues. Lifting up the least of these, making sure people have living wages and an education, making sure there's fairness in the criminal justice system and that equal protection under the law, regardless of your race or color or sexual identity, is non-negotiable. These are moral issues, and we can't stand down.

Under oppression, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew who they were. So they said to Nebuchadnezzar: We can't bow. Our God can deliver. Those boys knew that they might die for standing. They knew the king might make a fiery furnace seven times hotter, but even so they declared: We cannot bow.

Whenever we take a stand and choose not to bow, it



It's not just about
a president, it's
about an entire
web of money
and influence
that has been
working to tie
up American
democracy
forever.

does something to the heart of God. When God knows that our serving God is not predicated on knowing we're going to be delivered, God starts shaking on the throne. When we refuse to bow, it moves God. God doesn't keep them from being thrown in the fiery furnace. God decides instead to go in with them. God was the fourth one in the fire. God didn't save them by keeping them out of the fire. God saved them *in* the fire.

Has God ever saved you in the trouble? Has God ever walked with you through the fire? God is a very present help in time of trouble. The Lord will make a way inside the trouble.

The haters thought it was all over. But God was inside the trouble. And the Bible said that when they came out, they didn't even smell like they'd been in the fire, because the God I serve can deliver.

So it might look like that narcissistic Nebuchadnezzar and all of his nasty is going to nullify us. But stand, and the Lord will make a way somehow. God can bring power out of pain, mercy out of meanness, love out of hate. God can bring joy out of sorrow, good out of evil, hope out of despair. God can bring deliverance out of depression, and life out of death.

Like those Hebrew boys, we've got to make up our minds when it comes to the modern-day manifestation of Nebuchadnezzar.

Living in fiery times

When Nebuchadnezzar threw those boys in the fire, the old preachers say there was a pre-incarnation incarnation. That Jesus got in the fire with them.

We're in some fiery times right now. But bowing down is not an option. If Harriett Tubman didn't bow, if Medgar Evers didn't bow, if Frederick Douglass didn't bow, if Rosa Parks didn't bow, bowing down is not an option.

I serve one who was born in the time of another narcissistic maniac named Caesar. They hung him high, they stretched him wide, but that brown-skinned Palestinian Jew, that revolutionary, didn't bow and neither can we.

One day, we'll be able to bow—when we stand before the Lord. When the lion lays down with the lamb. When the rough places are made smooth, the crooked places are made straight, the mountains are made low, and the glory of the Lord is revealed. We can bow then.

But until then, stand. When there's nothing left to do, stand. Watch the Lord see you through. And after you've done all you can, stand. Because bowing down is not an option. ■

Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II is president of Repairers of the Breach and co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. This article is adapted from a sermon Barber delivered last fall at Howard University's Rankin Chapel in Washington, D.C.



How White Privilege Worked for Me

BY ABOUT SIXTH grade, a set of kids in the professional middle-class suburb where I grew up stopped doing homework, or really much work at all. They'd goof around in everything from math class to gym period. Getting average grades or being sent to the principal's office for misbehavior didn't seem to bother them that much. And their parents seemed to greet it all with a shrug.

It looked like good fun to me, so I figured I'd give this not-giving-a-damn thing a try. My parents greeted

was like them. I played sports and video games, watched MTV and worshipped skateboarder Tony Hawk, just like all the other 12-year-old boys.

"If you are not head-and-shoulders above the next candidate in a hiring process," my mother sternly said, "they will not give you the job." She repeated: "You are not like them."

My parents didn't come right out and say it, but what they meant was, "You are not white." Looking back now, I can put words to the fear in their eyes that night: Has being around lots of white people lulled their brown son into thinking that the white narrative applied to him?

Here is what I mean by "white narrative" (at least the late 20th century suburban middle-class version prevalent among the group of boys I describe above): Don't drop out of high school, don't commit a felony, try not to get a girl pregnant, and by age 26 things will work out for you. It worked out for your dad.

What my parents were furiously trying to communicate was this: However friendly you might be with those boys, however much you might share by way of interests and activities, your family lacks the easy familiarity—the decades of backyard barbeques, the country

club ties, the rounds and rounds of golf—that serves as the secret lubricant of "oh, sure, we'll give your son a place at the company" success. In other words, *we are not white*.

Maybe because at the end of the day I'm a pretty dutiful son, or maybe because I (secretly) all along actually enjoyed school—whatever the reason, in seventh grade I turned it around and started to excel. Academic excellence became the foundation on which I've built my organization, Interfaith Youth Core and, frankly, my life.

Those kids who partied through their teenage years and thought they'd wake up at 26 with a hangover and a stable job, well, turns out the 21st century doesn't work that way. They didn't have much to say at the 10-year high school reunion. By the 20th, they had stopped showing up.

Average is over, as economists who study the labor market like to say. White privilege still exists, but the brown narrative—earned achievement trumps inherited status—is ascendant.

Who will tell the white kids? ■

Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American.

My parents didn't come right out and say it, but what they meant was, "You are not white."

my Bart Simpson attitude with something stronger than a shrug.

I remember their fury after a school meeting where the teacher must have explained that my grades had fallen because I spent class time chatting with friends rather than focusing on worksheets. Right before the hammer came down, I attempted a weak protest: "But none of the other kids are doing work in class either," and ticked off a set of names that my parents knew.

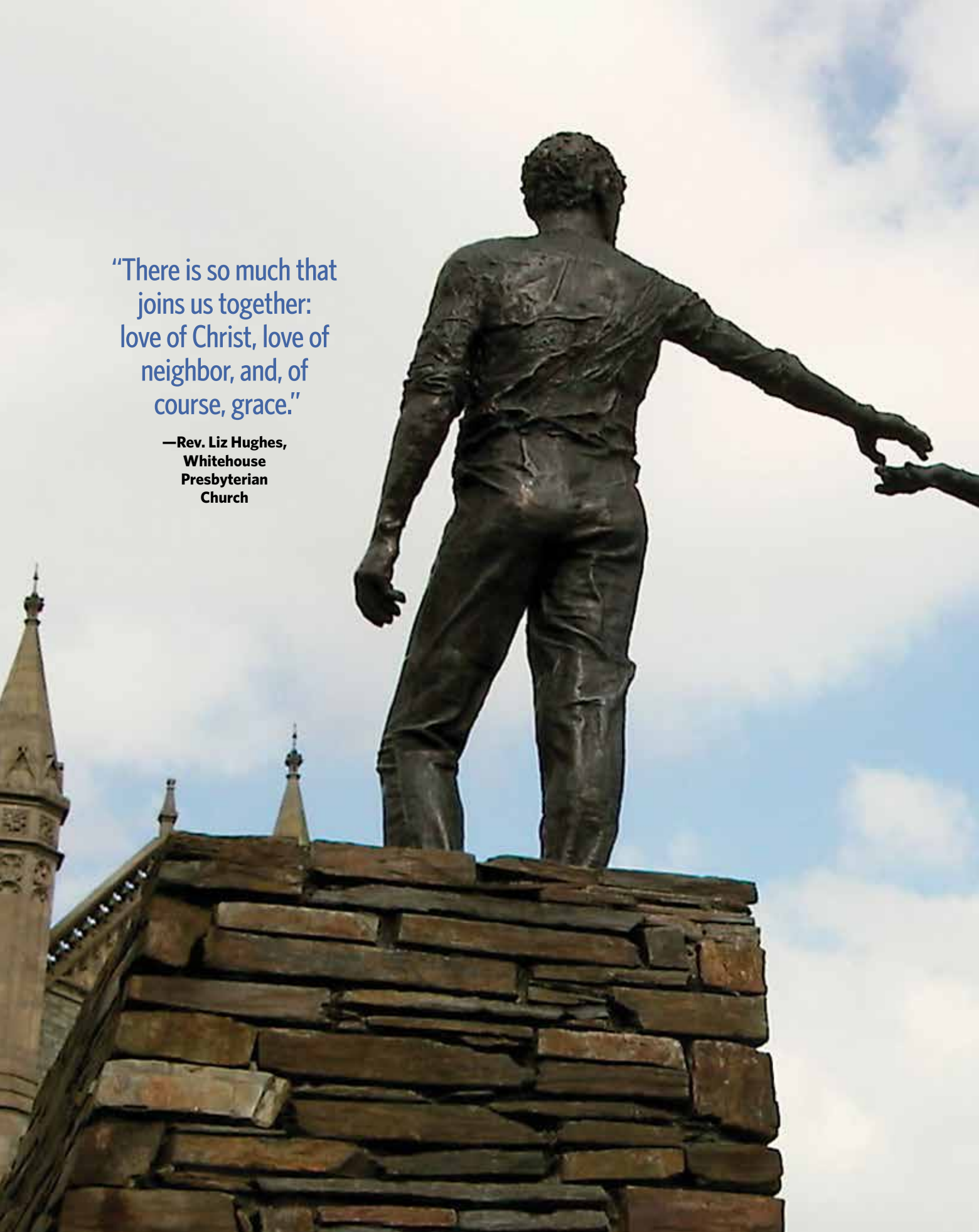
"You are not like them," came the stern response.

This confused me. I thought I



“There is so much that
joins us together:
love of Christ, love of
neighbor, and, of
course, grace.”

—Rev. Liz Hughes,
Whitehouse
Presbyterian
Church



Out of the Ashes

Two decades after the Good Friday accords, Protestant and Catholic churches in Northern Ireland are still working to build the peace.

by **LAYTON E. WILLIAMS**

Above a 2002 article in *The Irish News* headlined “Priests present cheque to minister” is a photograph of a collared clergywoman surrounded by four Catholic priests. They stand shoulder to shoulder, all smiling, looking toward something ahead of them. Dominating the background is the burned-out shell of a church.

The backdrop of this image—destruction and religion—exemplifies Northern Ireland to much of the world. But the foreground, Catholic and Protestant clergy standing together, smiling toward an unknown future, might just represent what Northern Ireland—in spite of and because of its divisive and violent history—has to teach the U.S. and other countries who find themselves caught in a divisive and violent present.

During the predawn hours of Aug. 2, 2002, Whitehouse Presbyterian Church, on the north side of Belfast, went up in flames. The fire was first spotted by a Catholic taxi driver who lived across the street—he was up late that evening. He called the fire department, but there wasn’t much that could be done. By morning, as the bleary-eyed pastor and congregants of Whitehouse arrived, the building had burned to the ground.

Eventually, the fire was ruled arson—the third attempt in the year and a half that Rev. Liz Hughes had served as minister at Whitehouse, acts of destruction born of the ongoing conflict between Protestants and Catholics throughout Northern Ireland. By 2002, it had already been four years since the Good Friday accords were signed and peace was officially declared in the small, British-ruled country, but action had not entirely caught up to policy.

Flying the colors

On that summer night in 2002, fire fueled by deeply rooted division, distrust, and a heritage of hatred lit the Shore Road that links northern Belfast and Newtownabbey, where Whitehouse Church is located. But the next night, a different kind of light was shining. In the middle of a prayer service, a young girl from the Catholic housing estate across the street arrived at the Presbyterian church with her mother, carrying a jar of coins—donations from Catholic families in the neighborhood. Over the next few weeks, Catholic churches in the community followed suit, raising nearly 10,000 pounds (more than \$13,000) to support the congregation’s efforts to rebuild.

The “Hands Across the Divide” sculpture, by Maurice Harron, was erected in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland in 1992, 20 years after Bloody Sunday.

Martin Melough/Conflict Archive on the Internet

The photograph celebrating this moment of community offers a powerful symbol of shared identity in a country where symbols and identity mean everything. In the moment that picture was taken—and even today—elsewhere in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland, Irish flags hang in Catholic neighborhoods while British flags hang in Protestant parts of town. Colors—orange and green and red and blue—carry dangerous weight, and many establishments bear signs forbidding sportswear, which carries its own deeper political significance. In some places, such as Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, dividing walls still stand, as well as countless mural memorials, physical monuments to a long history of violence.

For many in Northern Ireland, identity is deeply rooted in whether you are Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist, Loyalist or Republican. And the symbolism embodied in the flags and colors and clothing you display (and even whether you call it Derry or Londonderry) tells the world what you stand for, what you hope for, where you belong, and where you don't.

Peace efforts in the small country have required looking beyond its own divisive history and finding inspiration and hope in the struggles others have overcome. Murals in Belfast, Derry, and elsewhere depict Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and other revolutionaries from around the world. In fact, the civil rights movement in Derry/Londonderry made its oak leaf symbol half black and half white in recognition of the U.S. civil rights movement. The choice was meant to remind all those working for justice and equality in Northern Ireland that others had done it elsewhere, and they could too. Decades later, peace workers would take similar inspiration from the movement to end apartheid in South Africa and the struggle for justice and peace in Israel-Palestine.

For members of Whitehouse Presbyterian and its Catholic neighbor St. Mary's Star of the Sea, the path toward reconciliation has involved not only the influence of other countries and movements, but also a deeper look inward, to the heart of their own community. In the face of the identities of division that have wrought such violence in their country, these churches have spent the last several decades cultivating a profound and lasting



relationship. This relationship has included supporting each other in times of crisis, in the face of vandalism and other hateful acts. It has also become a part of their everyday life through shared worship, lunch groups, classes about theology, and learning opportunities for primary school children.

"There is so much more that joins us together: love of Christ, love of neighbor, love of scripture, and, of course, grace," says Rev. Hughes of Whitehouse.

Out of the Troubles

Despite its sectarian factions, the conflict in Northern Ireland has its roots in politics as much as religion. Centuries before Northern Ireland became its own country, the British government sent English and Scottish Protestants to Ireland to plant settlements, effectively pushing out the native Irish, who were prohibited by Britain from owning land. In the early 1920s, when the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland were established, Catholic Irish Nationalists opposed the division of Ireland while Protestant Unionists supported Britain's continued rule over Northern Ireland.

In the decades that followed, the divisions between these two groups deepened and formalized. Nationalists were seen as dissenters, and on that basis Unionists were given preferential treatment in housing, employment, and voting rights. In the 1960s, a nonviolent civil rights campaign was started as an attempt to end those discriminations, and tensions between Protestants and Catholics escalated. As paramilitary groups organized and clashed with one another and the police, violence broke out. Bombings, shootings, and murders claimed the lives of both Catholics and Protestants throughout the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. This period of violent unrest became known as the Troubles.

The Troubles were felt in northern Belfast

as acutely as anywhere else. The community around Whitehouse Presbyterian and St. Mary's Star of the Sea saw major displacement of Catholic families. The parish saw a staggering drop in members, from 12,000 to 3,000. A checkpoint was set up just outside the Presbyterian church. There was loss of life on both sides—mostly Catholic young men and Protestant police officers. Everyone was affected.

As ceasefires were negotiated and peace efforts unfolded in the 1990s, a peacemaking initiative called Moving Beyond Sectarianism was launched. As part of this movement, Catholic and Protestant congregations throughout the country made strides toward reconciliation and relationship-building. For most communities this meant one shared service a year, usually around Christmas. For Whitehouse and St. Mary's, it has grown into much more than that. The Northern Ireland conflict so often described in broad terms of sides and factions is, for these churches, a complex story of people and their commitment to move forward together from the violence their country has known.

Anne McDermott has been a member of St. Mary's Catholic parish for more than 30 years. She's been involved with the relationship-building efforts since they began two decades ago. There is an unflinching but thoughtful clarity when she speaks about the Troubles and the pain they inflicted on her whole community. Moves toward relationship-building, she explains, were born out of a conviction that in the face of such hardship, it was incumbent upon Christians to reach out to their neighbors. The word "neighbor" has come to hold greater significance than other powerful identifiers, even "Catholic" and "Protestant."

When asked why efforts toward reconciliation have been so successful in the community, Whitehouse members point



Members of Whitehouse Presbyterian and St. Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic churches gather with neighboring Methodist and Church of Ireland congregations for their annual Good Friday walk.

St. Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church

out that before the Troubles, before displacement, Protestants and Catholics lived and worked side by side. Many of those most involved in the relational efforts between the congregations are older, and they remember those days—despite the years of violence and unrest, they remember that they were neighbors first.

What forgiveness means

This sentiment had already begun to inspire reconciliation work on the Shore Road when Liz Hughes arrived in December 2000, and it's a conviction she shares.

Prior to Whitehouse, Hughes had spent eight years in the late '80s and early '90s serving as a minister—along with her husband—in Jamaica and on Grand Cayman island. During those years, she watched the conflict in Northern Ireland from a distance. Still, she was no stranger to confronting challenge. She was only the seventh woman ordained to ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, a denomination that still allows individual churches to reject women as pastors on the basis of “freedom of conscience.” When Hughes came to Whitehouse, she was the first woman to serve as their minister. Despite the challenges this presented, she was drawn to Whitehouse's warmth and hospitality—the same radical welcome that has propelled their reconciliation work in the community around them.

“If you live out loving your neighbor, sooner or later you're going to pray together,” Hughes explains. McDermott takes it a step farther. “It's immoral, actually,” she says, “that we don't come together to pray more often.”

Whitehouse and St. Mary's—sometimes with the nearby Methodist and Church of Ireland congregations—pray together and come together a surprising amount. Every year, all four congregations participate in a Good Friday walk. Together, a

estate, a shopping center, places that have seen their share of violence. In these spaces, too, they pray to the God they share for peace and for healing.

At sunrise on Easter, the congregations come together again to rejoice in the promise of resurrection and redemption.

Other times of the year, the congregants of Whitehouse and St. Mary's share in other kinds of fellowship. Children from the Catholic primary school come to visit Whitehouse and learn about the Presbyterian church's beliefs and traditions. Likewise, the students of the Protestant primary school visit Star of the Sea and learn about the Catholic sacraments and stained glass. Adult members of the community have committed to learning together as well.

Over the years, they've taken classes together—one recent series was an exploration of what each tradition believes and the history they share. Hughes points out a surprising piece of common history: In the past Presbyterians were viewed as dissenters, oppressed—alongside Catholics—by the Church of England and British rulers. Both churches were also built, in the same year, to support local millworkers.

Last spring, St. Mary's and Whitehouse Presbyterian held a joint service in celebration of their mutual 150th anniversary. Roughly 150 members of each congregation came together to sing, worship, pray, remember, and give thanks.

Beyond the bounds of this interwoven northern Belfast community, Northern Ireland today experiences significantly less violence and conflict than it has in the past. Various efforts at reconciliation have taken root all over the country. Still, there are challenges. And even with their impressive efforts,

there are challenges facing Whitehouse and St. Mary's too. For example, Hughes explains that the Protestants she ministers to don't always understand why Catholics fly the Irish flag. And members of Whitehouse make a point of clarifying that the Protestant schools are the state schools—implying a degree of normativity.

Several years ago, the two congregations shared a class on what forgiveness means. Reflecting on the experience, Catholics and Protestants alike described it as an important but profoundly difficult conversation for their context. And even as they prepared for their joint 150th anniversary celebration, they struggled to balance their different traditions and theology. McDermott described the challenge to find the best way to honor the dead in the service. Praying for the dead

is a crucial component in Catholic worship, but less so for Presbyterians.

What is largely a liturgical difference carries an extra element of weight when many of the dead being remembered died as a result of sectarian conflict.

Those directly involved in the relationship between St.

Mary's and Whitehouse know that they haven't always gotten it right. “We made mistakes,” one member admitted. “We still make mistakes.” Ironically, this humility seems to be a crucial component of their success. All involved in the relationship recognize that they have something to learn from one another and still need to grow.

Passing the torch

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Whitehouse and St. Mary's, and Northern Ireland as a whole, is the question of what's next. For the committed group of congregants who have spent the last two decades in relationship, the concern is about younger Christians remaining committed to the work. McDermott points out that St. Mary's has a dearth of younger members, and says that her hope rests in the young members of Whitehouse taking up the charge. Meanwhile, in December, Rev. Hughes said goodbye to Whitehouse after 17 years of ministry there. Thinking on Hughes' impending departure, St. Mary's member McDermott expressed sadness at the loss. “We are going

“We made mistakes,” one member admitted.
“We still make mistakes.”

to miss her terribly,” she said. Meanwhile, Hughes said that it will be important for the minister who follows her to remain committed to the relational work, and she believes that they will.

Still, another challenge facing the two congregations is the dwindling number of churchgoers overall. While members of Whitehouse and St. Mary’s are compelled toward reconciliation by their common faith in Christ, McDermott points out that many young people in Northern Ireland want little to do with religion when it seems to have given rise to nothing but conflict. Young people from different backgrounds make friends, with little concern for the Catholic/Protestant divide.

“They don’t talk about religion the same way we would,” McDermott says. “I personally think that’s a good thing.”

Meanwhile, the newest and youngest members of St. Mary’s parish are actually Indian and Filipino immigrants who have created their own worship services and come from an entirely different cultural context, one free of the centuries of Northern Ireland conflict. How these rapidly growing immigrant communities will impact and be impacted by those who lived through the Troubles remains to be seen, but what’s clear is that the future of Northern Ireland will be more diverse and more complex than ever.

For the members of Whitehouse and St. Mary’s who are committed to reconciliation work, the path forward is not entirely clear. Even the destination is murky. In Northern Ireland, reconciliation and peace efforts require reckoning with decades—even centuries—of injustice. But that injustice isn’t only systemic. For almost everyone, it’s deeply personal. When asked how Northern Ireland might achieve a peace that includes justice, McDermott points out that true justice—for the lives lost and trauma endured during the Troubles—isn’t really possible.

“When it’s ‘my father was murdered’—or more like grandfather at this point for so many people—how can you get justice for that? You can’t.” The more crucial question, she says, is how a country moves forward toward reconciliation without the possibility of perfect justice, at least in this world.

While these and many other questions linger, for this community along the Shore Road, one thing is clear: Whatever the future holds, they are moving toward it together, united in a common hope. ■

Layton E. Williams, audience engagement editor at Sojourners, visited Northern Ireland last fall to report this story.

Short Takes

FOUR QUESTIONS FOR...

Ruby Garner

Bio: Ruby Garner is a health educator for Health People, an organization in New York’s South Bronx that provides services to people in need. She is an adviser to the AIDS Institute of the New York State Department of Health and partners with her church, First Corinthian Baptist in Manhattan, to provide medical care to its lower-income neighbors.

Website: healthpeople.org

1 What inspired you to partner with your church? Being able to give to my community, which has a lot of disparities, and deliver information and resources to people who need them is my passion. Working at Health People, I do presentations on behalf of the state of New York on diabetes prevention, health care for women, HIV, how to establish and maintain healthy relationships, and other topics. It made sense to take what I already do and bring it to my church.



Health People

2 What do communities in the South Bronx need? There needs to be education on how to find resources. There are a lot of people who still aren’t aware that they are at risk for diabetes, heart attack, HIV, Hepatitis C, high cholesterol, etc. I want to reach them. A lot of people in my neighborhood are undocumented and homeless. There are people who don’t have information that can benefit them, and they’re afraid to seek information, out of fear that they will be targeted or penalized in some way. I try to reassure them and get them the help they need.

3 How does your Christian faith intersect with your work? When I go where I’m needed, I feel like I’m being filled up with love, with something more important and bigger than me. When people ask me questions and they really want to know the answers—they’re interested and care about their health, their children—it boosts me and reassures my faith. I’m on a journey, but during my journey God is pushing me in such a way that I’m able to help other people.

Every day that someone leaves me, I want them to leave with something. Once I finish my presentation, I want them to be able to take something with them that’s good for them and may be able to help someone else. That’s why I don’t just give presentations in the Bronx. I go to Albany [N.Y.]—I go wherever I can afford. Sometimes I get frustrated, but then I meet someone and have information they need, and they say, “I don’t know how this happened, but by the grace of God.”

4 What would you say to someone to convince them to start helping their communities? The work is rewarding. My reward is doing it and feeling good that I’ve done the right thing. My reward is the fact that I’m able to help someone. I don’t care if I only help one person a week or one person a year. While we are on Earth, trying to live together, there are many ways that we can do God’s ministry. The whole purpose is to be able to pour out as much love and information as we have been given in our past—because I didn’t get where I am now by myself. ■

—Interview by Da’Shawn Mosley



A Lenten Poem

How to bring god closer
after the frenzy, the snarling riots,
this god hanging on a tree?
Do I stand here, as the story goes,
looking, do *nothing*, imagine
pouring myself toward him,
a flame across a field?

Or would I go there,
climb up, pry the first nails out
with the claw of a hammer,
wrap my arm tightly around his waist,
like my son I rescue from a branch too high?
I struggle to keep his weight on my hip,
his arm over my shoulder
while I wrest the other nails loose.

Smelling his sweat and tears,
I hoist him, lower him to the ground,
and then, with a wet cloth,
wash blood and dirt from his face,
tell him it will be all right now.

He is not forsaken, I say.
I'm here and can help.
I'm strong and fierce, have survived childbirths
and madness, sickness and suicides.

Here, I will carry you down.
I will go get more help.

And I know others who will come,
with bandages, bread,
broth and soft songs, blankets.
We will not leave you there.

Christine E. Black lives in Charlottesville, Va.

Painting by Nicholas Mynheer



Illustration
from Chris Koelle's
The Book of Revelation

The Politics of Revelation

John's Christology of the Lamb

A Bible study • by RETA HALTEMAN FINGER

When I asked various Christians about their reaction to the book of Revelation, I heard back: “Dark and scary.” “It’s too violent for me.” and “It’s a total blank. I really don’t know anything about it.”

But this dramatic, political, incendiary scripture is important for us to understand today. It was written in empire and should be read today in our own imperial context to learn what it means to follow the Lamb. We also need to know how it has been used and misused by Christians throughout history. As evangelical New Testament scholar Gordon Fee says, “To understand what a text *means*, we must first understand what it *meant*!”

John shows that only nonviolent resistance

Revelation is not an easy text to understand. It code-switches.

Reading the apocalypse

First, a bit of background. The word “revelation” (*apokalypsis* in Greek) belongs to a popular genre of Jewish literature prevalent from about 250 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. An apocalypse purports to be a vision of a realm beyond our normal senses, where God is in control and will eventually break in to rescue the faithful from oppression. Apocalyptic literature is intended to bring hope during times of political uncertainty or persecution.

The books of Daniel and Revelation are our only canonical examples of apocalyptic literature. Other Jewish apocalypses written during this period are attributed to heroes of old, such as Adam, Enoch, and Abraham, to lend authority. Daniel also is pseudonymous, since Daniel lived 400 years before the second-century B.C.E. events described in chapters 7 to 12 of that book.

Only John in Revelation uses his own name and his own location: “I, John, your brother who shares with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). He is in political exile on Patmos, off the coast of Asia Minor (now Turkey), because of his witness to the good news of Jesus.

Revelation is not an easy text to understand. It code-switches—using symbols, images, and numbers from a particular first-century oppressed culture that doesn’t want the imperial guard to crack its communications. Revelation presupposes readers who live in Asia Minor, where allegiance to Roman gods—and even emperor worship—was demanded. Allusions to the Hebrew Bible saturate John’s account; many of these allusions are completely unfamiliar to readers today.

Because Revelation is complex, twisted interpretations of the book have been used to justify horrific violence against others, from the waves of Crusader attacks on the Holy Land between 1095 and 1291 C.E. up to a contemporary insidious interpretation of Revelation that undergirds Christian Zionism. One person I asked about Revelation told me about her recent trip to Israel on a “prophecy tour.” She was pumped up about the supposed end-times clues she had found in Revelation. “I believe Jesus will return within the next 10 years!” she said. Based on misinterpretations of Revelation, Christian Zionists predict a coming final war in Israel that will occur after they (the faithful) are raptured to heaven. This perspective has negatively impacted political efforts to create a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians because Christian Zionists believe peace will thwart God’s plan for the final “battle of Armageddon” (16:16).

An epic drama

John begins his apocalyptic vision with a strong, authoritative Jesus who promises a message for each of John’s seven churches. The sharp sword in Jesus’ mouth (1:16) prepares church members for the words of praise and of sharp

criticism they will receive (see chapters 2 and 3).

But the central scene of the book occurs in chapters 4 and 5, where a door opens in heaven and John is invited to “Come on up, and I will show you what must take place after this” (4:1). John sees a throne upon which the Indescribable One sits, surrounded by 24 elders, probably representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. On each side of the throne are four living creatures (symbols of the four corners of the earth) and the birds (wild and tame animals) and humans who live there. They are *all* praising God without ceasing (4:4-11).

Then John notices a scroll in the right hand of the One on the throne, sealed with seven seals. John does not say what the scroll represents, but it is related to God’s authority over the course of history. An angel loudly extends a challenge: “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?”

Take a moment to reflect on John’s use of emotion and suspense in this scene. Visualize it being performed in each of the seven small house churches receiving this document. Members experience mixed emotions as they witness the pure joy that abounds in heaven as all creatures praise the One who made such joy possible.

But then a problem arises—a problem demanding resolution (5:1). God’s will in history cannot continue unless someone is worthy to open the scroll. The angel’s question echoes through the air, while each living being waits for some unknown hero to step forward.

But John weeps bitterly, “because no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it” (5:4).

Then one of the elders tells John not to weep. “See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). Even today we recognize the lion as an aggressive “king of the beasts,” but this association is as ancient as the royal lions of Egypt carved into stone. Jewish listeners would think of Genesis, where Jacob’s son Judah is already called a lion with a scepter (49:9-10). “The Root of David” (from Isaiah 11:1) confirms this lion as messiah in the line of David. How exciting for these church members who often feel marginalized and forced to compromise to survive! Will the Lion lead a political revolution? Are these the end times?

The reader pauses, and the listening church community waits expectantly.

But no lion appears.

Instead, John sees “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.” This broken, bleeding, but resurrected Lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of the One on the throne.

In this way, John intends to show that only this method of nonviolent resistance to evil can ultimately shift the course of human history in another direction.

Maybe these church communities were disappointed when they did not see a victorious Lion, but the entire crowd in heaven understood—falling “before the Lamb” and singing “a new song.”

to evil can shift the course of human history.

“You are worthy to take the scroll,” sing the beasts and elders, “for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.” (In Greek: “You are worthy to take the scroll ... *because* you were slaughtered.”)

Two similar songs follow—the second sung by uncounted myriads of angels, and the third by “every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea” (5:8-13).

As a master of dramatic rhetoric, John shocks the hearers with the image of the Lamb who stands resurrected though bearing the scars of a murderous death as a political enemy of the state.

Jesus as the nonviolent lamb?

Although one or two scholars have argued that this Lamb is actually a militant ram, most today understand the counter-intuitive challenge John presents to his churches.

Loren Johns, in his book *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, demonstrates how this epic scene is “the rhetorical fulcrum of the Apocalypse.” And it is meant to shock. Before this scene, Jesus is never called a Lamb in Revelation. Afterward, he is referred to as the Lamb 28 more times.

Did John’s seven congregations get the point? Or did they view Jesus as the Lamb slaughtered as a once-and-for-all substitutionary atonement for sin? A few references in other New Testament writings speak of Jesus’ death as “for us,” but John’s entire apocalypse calls the Christian community to live out a nonviolent faith under violent imperial domination.

In Revelation’s opening verses, Jesus is identified as the “faithful witness” (1:5), a term later applied to the martyred Antipas at Pergamum. The same word in Greek—*martus*—means both “witness” and “martyr,” indicating the high risk that faithful witness requires in a culture where violence is the go-to solution.

Although the Lamb’s victory has already been won through his nonviolent resistance to evil and his resurrection, the same practices must be continued by his followers. Every chapter in Revelation underscores this point. For example: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10); “Follow the [slaughtered] Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4); and the opening of the fifth seal (6:9-11) makes it clear that faithful witnesses also get slaughtered.

Perseverance in persecution

John of Patmos, with an unusual gift as a seer, understood how difficult it was to be a faithful witness to the crucified and risen Christ and resist acquiescing to the emperor cult. Economic issues loomed large. No one could buy or sell products who did not bear the “mark of the beast” on forehead or right hand (13:16-17). When the church at Laodicea seemed proud of its wealth and respect in the city (3:15-19), Jesus, through John, rebukes them for participating in the imperial marketplace and considers them naked, blind, and lukewarm. He urges them to repent.

We know from church history that political persecution waxed and waned during Christianity’s first 300 years. Some Christians did apostatize during intense pogroms, and the church struggled over whether to accept those who repented back into membership. Other Christians remained “faithful witnesses,” but were killed, seeding the church with their blood and joining the uncounted multitude “standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (7:9).

Revelation is a troubling text. Its few depictions of women are not positive, reflecting John’s need for additional insight into his male-oriented culture. It is also filled with violence that can appear, without close study, to be gratuitous.

But John’s Christology is clear, and it is highly political. The Lamb achieved victory over evil by submitting to execution and trusting in God to raise him to life. Though not evident on earth under Roman domination, the Seer’s eye has pierced the veil between heaven and earth. Interludes inserted throughout the apocalypse encourage John’s listeners to practice Jesus’ methods of resistance and to pray for the justice and judgment still to come. These heavenly pictures (7:1-17; 11:15-19; 14:1-5; 15:2-4) assure believers that the true victory (as opposed to the struggle against Roman persecution) is already won.

Can John’s strange and symbolic Apocalypse reveal wisdom for us today?

John’s vision of heaven also includes ethnic diversity (“saints from every tribe and language and people and nation,” see 5:8, 7:9). Does this give new insight to the “take-a-knee” protests at sporting events against police brutality?

Revelation raises difficult questions: How does “Christian nationalism” differ from Lamb Christology? What are the political and economic costs of “following the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4)?

It is significant for the 144,000 standing with the Lamb on the heavenly Mount Zion that “in their mouth no lie was found” (14:5). Injustice and domination breed lies and deceit. How can we live truthfully in our own context?

John’s writing is subtle. It uses art, metaphor, and cultural icons to convey a subversive message intended to remind followers of Jesus to stay strong in the gospel. Where do we see this happening today?

Following the nonviolent Lamb is—and always has been—risky. You might have to lose your life to gain it. Thus, John’s Christology would not be complete without his vision of the final consummation of human history (chapters 21-22). Here we are given a vision to cling to: “a new heaven and a new earth,” a “holy city” with open gates providing hospitality for all, a “pure river of the water of life” so no one is thirsty, perpetual fruit-bearing trees whose leaves give “healing for the nations,” and in the center a Lamb. ■

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When Jesus calls people to follow him,
he calls them into community.





BOWLING TOGETHER

Rejecting the heresy of individualism.

by **WESLEY GRANBERG-MICHAELSON**

IN HIS BOOK *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier explains that for any community to thrive, there must be more members who can say “me for the community” than those who say “the community for me.”

That simple contrast—me for the community vs. the community for me—captures the heart of the dilemma facing modern Western culture and, by extension, the expressions of the church that are sustained in its midst. The Enlightenment and the models for political, social, and economic life that it spawned in modern Western culture freed humanity from oppressive, authoritarian rule governing thought, religion, and political structures. The role, rights, and agency of the individual became paramount.

This revolutionized the philosophical framework for how society should be governed.

Advertising in our consumer society wants us to believe that the individual is at the center of everything.

In contrast to individualism, what generally can be termed “collectivism” begins by asserting that realities of social groups are the primary reference point for understanding how societies should be organized and governed. In a nutshell, individuals don’t really have a meaningful identity apart from their belonging to a social group. Participation in a collective group, in this view, is both a more realistic understanding of how society functions and is the context that makes individual life possible.

For political philosophy, the question becomes where the starting point is: Does society find its moral foundation in the rights of its individual members, who then make agreements and social contracts for how best to preserve these rights? Or does society begin by recognizing we are social beings, and collectively we decide—through various political processes—how best to secure the rights of all who belong to a shared community? Normally this becomes a healthy political dialogue between the primacy of individual freedom and the responsibility of upholding the common good of society.

But ideas can be pushed to extremes, at times with frightful consequences of enormous social evil. That was the case, most dramatically, when collectivism was hijacked by Marxist ideology. Declaring that all supposed individualism was an illusion since the real circumstances and destiny of working people were completely controlled by those who owned the means of production, Marxism proclaimed that liberation would come only through the revolutionary overthrow of the power structure. A new collective state, guided by a vanguard of leadership expressed through a party, would demand complete allegiance to achieve its utopian goals. The results were not only failed economic systems, but authoritarian terror subjecting millions to untold suffering and death.

Individualism has also been pushed to extremes. The familiar term “rugged individualism” was coined by Herbert Hoover in his final campaign speech for his election as president in 1928. The stock market crashed seven months later, plunging the country into the Great Depression. Hoover continued promoting rugged individualism and, apart from major public works projects, was reluctant to see government intervene in the economic life of the nation, even as social and economic catastrophe escalated. One result was Franklin Roosevelt’s landslide election in 1932. More recently, philosophers such as Ayn Rand took individualism to such extremes that selfishness became a virtue, dismissing altruism and self-sacrifice and advocating a radical laissez-faire capitalism free of any government interference.

Normally, however, there’s at least an aspirational appeal to care about the common good. Think, for instance, of the famous line in President John F. Kennedy’s

Inaugural Address: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” It was a political way of saying, “me for the community, rather than the community for me.”

Nevertheless, the dominance of individualism as a primary feature shaping American life is beyond question. For example, the Pew Research Center posed this question to Americans and Europeans: “What’s more important in society, that everyone be free to pursue life’s goals without interference from the state, or that the state play an active role in society so as to guarantee that nobody is in need?” Fifty-eight percent of Americans cited that an individual’s freedom was most important, while majorities in European nations felt opposite. For most Americans, the starting point is “the community for me.” The creative power of advertising in our consumer society, meshed with the tools of social media, wants us to believe that the individual is at the center of everything.

Biblical faith and community

But here’s the rub. That assumption is, in fact, foreign to Christian faith. Put simply, it’s an unbiblical, alien concept. The biblical story, beginning first with creation, launches into human history with God calling forth a people. Angels visiting Abraham and Sarah promise their offspring will multiply into a people chosen and shaped by God. Moses has the God-given task of liberating a people. They are then led as a community seeking a place, a new land, together where their community could blossom. Prophets call the people of God back to their true identity, forsaking other corporate loyalties.

Then, the people, as a community, are sent into exile, where they long as a people to be restored together to their homeland. The promise of salvation coming through the Messiah, the Anointed One, is given to the people of Israel, and extended beyond. When Jesus calls those to follow him, he calls them into a community, and not to private, individualistic fulfillment. At Pentecost, the Spirit of God was poured out to create a new community, the church. This community, together, crosses and reconciles the divisive boundaries in society—Jew/Greek, Slave/Free, Male/Female. All this happens in and through belonging to the new community of God’s people.

This community is called the “Body of Christ.” Throughout salvation history, God’s action has focused on creating a people faithful to God’s love and purposes for the world. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, people are invited to become members of this community, based on God’s grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Thus, this community, the church, is equipped to embody and carry forth together the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Just as the Spirit

Individualistic self-indulgence will always search for threads of religious justification.

descended uniquely on Jesus as God's Son, that same Spirit now fills the Body of Christ, together, in its ongoing witness of God's grace and love.

Much of the New Testament is devoted to explaining, exhorting, and instructing those who follow Jesus what it means to live together as a community, experiencing the gifts of the Spirit, and demonstrating the unity and reconciliation that is God's gift. Thus, the metaphor of existing together as one body highlights powerfully the intrinsic interdependence of every member with one another. One's relationship to God is placed in a new relationship of love to one another. This is not an optional choice, but a defining connection. Christian faith, incorporating us into the reach of God's grace, binds us to one another as Christ's body. This Christian understanding of community clarifies that those who follow Jesus are not a random collection of individuals.

The starting point for one who follows Jesus is always found in God's action to form a faithful people. The goal is to become incorporated into a community that is the vehicle for God's transforming work in the world. The goal is not to find one's individual happiness and affirm one's individual rights. Therefore, Christians are always beckoned primarily to say, *me* for the community. That's what it means to be claimed by God and participate in God's ongoing transformation and redemption of the world.

Of course, Jesus comes to us as individuals. Each person is confronted with an invitation to accept the gospel, or not. Our relationship to God is personal, and even intimate. The Christian journey always has an inward as well as an outward direction. However, one's transforming, personal encounter with God's grace and love destroys the illusion of individualism. We no longer live unto ourselves. It's not about *me*. Called and claimed by God's love, we enter indissolubly into the community of God's people. That's where we ground our identity, where we find our nurture, where we experience God's love, and where we discover our calling. It happens together.

Life as relationships

It is against this backdrop that the religious heresy of American individualism, woven into the fabric of a domesticated faith and reinforced by the cultural heritage of the Western Enlightenment, becomes exposed. Ingrained in the heritage and popularized story of our country, individualism has become embedded in versions of American theology that, in fact, are globally exceptional. And that's not a compliment. The expressions are numerous, from the self-improvement theologies of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert H. Schuller to the "prosperity gospel" of Paula White, Creflo Dollar, and Joel

Osteen. Faith growing in American soil can readily draw on the culture's taproot of rugged individualism.

The popularity of these ministries is testimony not to their fidelity to the biblical message but to their determination to place the psychological fulfillment

and material success of the individual at the center of the faith experience. In the United States, that message sells. Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston is the largest in the United States. In its day, Schuller's "Hour of Power" was the most widely viewed religious telecast. And when Creflo Dollar walks his prosperity gospel talk with two Rolls-Royces, a Gulfstream jet, and a collection of ultra-luxury homes, his followers love it, seeing it as evidence of God's blessings. The message, it seems, is not just community for *me*, it's the world for *me*.

Individualistic self-indulgence will always search for threads of religious justification and blessing, particularly in the crazy patch-work quilt of U.S. Christianity. This tempting message can captivate many. But in the end, simple wisdom prevails as most believers realize that Jesus didn't come to earth to give people Gulfstream jets.

A thirst for community, among both rich and poor, persistently endures. Expressions of the church that will thrive in the future and that will resonate life reflecting the core of Christian faith will invite people into gracious, accepting communities shaped by the character and presence of God's love. Such communities become the reference point for one's life of discipleship, offering accountability, nurture, and trust. Moreover, they are the social laboratories providing the antidote to the mythical power and attraction of self-centered individualism in the culture.

In many respects, U.S. congregations now find themselves at a crossroads. Popular streams of spiritually sanctioned individualism, drawn from the culture, reverberate through many parts of the U.S. church. But the communal nature of Christian faith, with its overwhelming biblical roots, has gone from being an anti-establishment practice to becoming almost commonplace. As U.S. Christianity faces its future, increasingly its congregations will need to choose which of these versions of the gospel will claim their allegiance and shape their life and ministry. This is not a matter of accommodating a diversity of views. It's a question of walking faithfully, with others, in response to God's self-giving love. ■

*Wesley Granberg-Michaelson is former general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. This article is adapted with permission from his forthcoming book *Future Faith: Ten Challenges Reshaping Christianity in the 21st Century* (Fortress Press, 2018).*



CultureWatch
BOOKS ART MUSIC FILM

By Stephanie Sandberg

Telling Their Own Stories

Women playwrights push back at male domination of theater.

LAST YEAR WILL GO DOWN in history for many reasons. For women, it was the year we came together from all walks of life, said #MeToo—and were finally acknowledged and believed by many. There was and still is hope that this grassroots call for women's rights and dignity will flow into all areas of life and become more than a symbolic action.

A glimpse of that future is taking form off-Broadway. This season three woman-written and -directed plays, performed by entirely female casts, opened to critical acclaim. It's an exceedingly rare occurrence, as New York theater has endured a century of male dominance in all the related professions except costume design and stage management. In 2015, the League of Professional Theatre Women, as part of a project called Women Count, tracked the number of women working in all aspects of theater in 22 off-Broadway theaters from 2010 to 2015. Only 30 percent of plays premiering in these venues were written by women, with 33 percent being directed by women. So these multiple women-driven plays offer hope for gender equity in the theater world.

Above, cast and crew members of *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*, with playwright Jocelyn Bioh, far right.



Redefining beauty

School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play, by Jocelyn Bioh, is a dizzying romp through nasty coming-of-age teen drama that pays homage to Tina Fey's classic *Mean Girls*. Taking place in a Ghanaian girl's boarding school during the 1980s, Bioh's first full-length play addresses cruel, clique-ish competition among adolescents using the template of the American genre, yet something fresh emerges. The story follows the queen of the school, Paulina (MaameYaa Boafo), as she vies to be named Miss Ghana and participate in the Miss Universe pageant.

While the comedic ending is not significantly surprising, there is a poignant and timely theme that emerges through the exploration of African beauty. Paulina

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wishes to be white so desperately that she dangerously bleaches her skin. When a fairer-skinned Ghanaian-American girl enrolls in the school, Paulina's jealousy flares. The pageant recruiter clearly prefers the lighter skin and modern style of the new girl, Ericka (Nabiyah Be), who is eventually chosen to represent the school. Bioh's thematic exploration of beauty carries through to the end of the play as the girls watch the Miss Universe pageant on television and witness Ericka get passed over in favor of white women. Yet

These women-driven plays offer a glimmer of hope for gender equity in the theater world.

the real beauty in the play is captured in the community of support formed by the young school women, which defies all expectations.

Life as a team sport

Community also emerges at the center of another play, on stage at Lincoln Center. Sarah DeLappe's first full-length play, *The Wolves*, is a coming-of-age drama about a girls' indoor soccer team that presents an excellent ensemble of characters. What DeLappe accomplishes is a fierce symphony of adolescent language that leaves one feeling like a voyeur peeping in from the sidelines. The plot unfolds to reveal a struggle with identity and acceptance, where the girls grapple with loving themselves and one another. While they blend together into a girl-power ensemble, DeLappe does well at giving each character a distinctive tone and rhythm. There's the team captain who struggles to lead, the party girl who becomes pregnant, and her friend who tries to support her. There's the bulimic who tries to hide her secret and the girl who feels that she can never say anything right or at the right time. Finally, there's the newcomer from another country who has only ever played soccer for fun and yet becomes the team's new star, posing a challenge to the existing power structure. Together they do homework and watch Harry Potter, experience parties and periods, and gossip and

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New & Noteworthy



Audrey Assad

A RETURNING VOICE

Songwriter Audrey Assad, daughter of a Syrian refugee, releases her first album of original material in four years. *Evergreen* features songs about "rebirth, the rebuilding of trust, and the discovery of joy and love." PledgeMusic

RESPECT FOR REFUGEES

Artist and activist Ai Weiwei brings the global refugee crisis to the big screen through his captivating documentary *Human Flow*. Filmed in 23 countries, the documentary features stories of desperation, courage, and resilience and speaks to our shared humanity. humanflow.com

A REFRESHED CLASSIC

Originally published in 1978, *The Upside-Down Kingdom's* call to "embody the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven" still resonates with readers. This anniversary edition of Donald Kraybill's book includes new interpretations, connections to current events, and discussion questions by D.L. and Krispin Mayfield. Herald Press

FAITH UNDER FIRE

In 1957, Melba Pattillo Beals helped integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Ark. Today, the bestselling author shares how faith and family emboldened her to confront racial injustice in *I Will Not Fear: My Story of a Lifetime of Building Faith Under Fire*. Revell

A Wound That Still Bleeds

OVER THE COURSE of 2017, I spent a lot of time thinking about how the catastrophe of November 2016 came about and a lot of time listening to country singer-songwriter Margo Price. Somewhere along the way, the two activities came together.

Price's artistic rise roughly coincided with Trump's political one. She won the Americana Emerging Artist Award for 2016 with her first album, *Midwest Farmer's Daughter*, and her second, *All American Made*, was released to much acclaim in October. She makes the kind of rough-hewn, class-conscious country rock that is one of my minimum daily requirements. Both of her albums are anchored by intensely autobiographical songs ("Hands of Time" and "Heart of America," respectively) that spring from the same historic disruption in her family's life: the loss of their family farm to foreclosure during the 1980s farm crisis.

But here's the kicker: Margo Price wasn't even 3 years old in

In the 1980s, almost 300,000 farms were lost forever.

1986 when her "daddy lost the farm ... [and] took a job at the prison." She must have little or no conscious memory of farm life, or the foreclosure, but when she sits down with her guitar to pour out her soul, that's what keeps coming. It's a wound that, 30 years later, not only hasn't healed, it hasn't even stopped bleeding.

Maybe that's where we need to begin if we're to understand what happened in rural America in 2016. In the 1980s, almost 300,000 farms were lost forever. Hundreds of "failed" farmers killed themselves in shame and despair. Many small towns just dried up and blew away. It was a big deal.



Shutterstock

But then America moved on. There was a tech bubble to inflate, and all these new gadgets to play with, and supermarket prices stayed low, so why bother with farmers?

Maybe that's when the feeling of being "forgotten" by the rest of the country started. It only deepened in subsequent decades as corporate free-trade deals took away the factories that had been one of the only other sources of a dignified livelihood in most small towns. And finally, in 2016, a demagogue came along to open all those old wounds and fan the embers of those grievances into a roaring flame of resentment at all the wrong people.

Here's something else to think about. There's every reason to suspect that the whole cycle is starting again. Farm Aid, the organization started by Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp, and Neil Young to combat the '80s farm disaster, is now talking about a "looming crisis on American farms."

Net farm income fell about 45 percent between 2013 and 2016. As of November 2017, the U.S. Department of Agriculture projected median farm income for 2017 to be negative \$1,100. And the suicide rate among white male agriculture

workers, according to the Centers for Disease Control, is now 50 percent higher than it was during the peak of the 1980s crisis. In fact, in 17 states people who work in agriculture are killing themselves at a rate five times greater than the general population.

The root causes of this looming crisis are the same as they were in the 1980s. U.S. agriculture policy is set by an oligopoly of a few giant corporations that keep crop prices paid to farmers low. To survive, the farmer must produce more, which requires buying more seed, fertilizer, and equipment and buying or renting more land, which drives the farmer further into debt.

If we are ever going to have a healthy society, much less a just one, we will need to use the power of government to create a system of subsidies and incentives that allow people to make a reasonable, honorable, and sustainable living on the land, growing food products that we actually need. And we better do it soon, while we still have some farmers around. ■



Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.

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tease their way through teenage existence. The triumph of the play is that it becomes an introspective exploration of identity as these “wolves” smell one another out, seek who they truly are as young women, and confront a tragic plot twist. *The Wolves* reveals that, in the midst of tragedy, we must show up to the game and continue to play, despite the despairing moments we all face.

The nexus of suffering and love

Tragedy lays bare harsh truths of women’s existence in Amy Herzog’s new play, *Mary Jane*. It tells the electrifying story of a single mother caring for her son, Alex, a child with cerebral palsy and seizures. Mary Jane (Carrie Coon) treads a tattered life, daily fighting a war to keep her son alive. She balances doctor visits with trying to hold down a job, and sleeps on a pull-out couch in a tiny apartment, never knowing when Alex’s next attack will wake her from fitful sleep into full-blown panic. We never meet Alex. In an adept playwriting move reminiscent of the Greeks, Herzog keeps the tragedy in the wings—encountered only as haunting beeps and alarms from machines that support Alex and monitor his condition.

The full effect of the tragedy crashes down on Mary Jane when her son endures a prolonged seizure. There is no safety net, no male breadwinner to come to the rescue, yet she endures, as so many women must do. *Mary Jane* reflects ethically on the struggle to survive the nightmare maze of U.S. health care. The conflicts in the play exist not between people, but between Mary Jane and the fate she fears for her son and herself. The exhaustion comes through in her language as she moves from conversation to conversation with other female characters: nurses and doctors, other mothers, and a Buddhist chaplain. The latter counsels that her struggles and questions would be there even without the possibility of losing Alex. Mary Jane wonders if her existence has meaning outside of this suffering. In a poetic breath, we are left with her questioning God.

The open-ended nature of these three plays leave us, much like Mary Jane, with more questions than answers. Will things ever change for us? Will we endure this dark existence? Will we find an answer for our suffering? Ultimately, these productions



From *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*

WHO IS MY ENEMY?

I HAVE A SIMPLE view of what makes a movie great: Technical craft and aesthetic vision operating at their highest frequencies come together in service of a story or images that help us live better. How does the movie interact with what Mennonite peace theorist and practitioner John Paul Lederach calls the choice to participate in escalating dehumanization or escalating humanization? In other words, does the movie help us become less human or more? In a narrative film, do the characters’ doubts and loves, the pain they suffer, and the results of their actions leave us with a deeper sense of our own humanity?

No aspect of popular culture more urgently deserves our attention than how “enemies” are presented. What motivates “bad guys,” and how are they dealt with by “good guys”? What side is the audience on? It has been noted by some that every audience watching **Star Wars** wants to believe that it’s the Rebel Alliance, fighting a titanic battle against an Evil Empire. Some viewers may imagine the Empire is North Korea. Others may imagine it is the U.S. Then, of course, there is the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s clarity: that the line between good and evil runs *through* every person, not *between* us.

I want movie bad guys to be more than monsters. That’s the only honest way to portray the bearers of evil action.

Broken, twisted, overcome by selfishness, to be sure, but human still.

The movies that tell the truth about violence and what it does to those who carry it out range from *The Godfather* to *Unforgiven*, from *Munich* to *Do the Right Thing*. They reveal the vicious cycle in which killing never solves anything. Then there are movies that show mercy to antagonists and present another way than merely “wiping out” your enemy—*The Color Purple*, *Shutter Island*, *Beatriz at Dinner*, *Jean de Florette*, the recent *Planet of the Apes* trilogy.

But it’s striking how often primarily humane movies opt for simply killing the bad guy. Two otherwise-exquisite recent movies, **Coco** and **The Shape of Water**, are diminished by not imagining a response to their villains beyond retribution. More thoughtful is the resolution of the amazing **Get Out**, which metaphorizes the history and legacy of slavery and allows the protagonist to kill only in self-defense, even offering some mercy when we in the audience might easily settle for summary execution. It left me thinking: If we don’t support the death penalty in real life, we probably shouldn’t applaud it in the movies. ■

Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and founder of moviesandmeaning.com and www.irelandretreats.com.

remind us that the questions are far more important than the answers.

In some ways, the plays dwell in what are commonly considered trivialities of female existence—the day-to-day living of making ourselves look good, caring for children, and dodging our way through the cliques and the systems of power that surround us. There are many times when the women feel distant from one another, even though they share in the same moments. Perhaps this distance

is felt because female narratives have rarely been heard. We hadn't been permitted to tell our stories. These plays are changing that. As more voices are brought forth, in the arts and elsewhere, new opportunities will arise for both challenge and solidarity among all types of women. ■

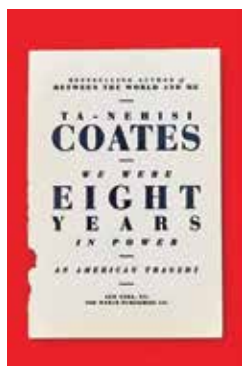
Stephanie Sandberg is an assistant professor of theater and film studies at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va.

Reviewed by Da'Shawn Mosley

CAN THIS COUNTRY BE **SAVED?**

***We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. One World.**

TA-NEHISI COATES is an atheist, but in *We Were Eight Years in Power* he atones for sin. In a 2008 article about Bill Cosby for *The Atlantic*, Coates failed to thoroughly report on the sexual assault allegations brought against the comedian, only mentioning them briefly. On page 12 of *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Coates repents. “That was my shame,” he writes. “That was my failure. And that was how this story began.”



By “this story,” Coates means his ongoing career as a correspondent for *The Atlantic*, during which he has received a MacArthur genius grant, a National Magazine Award, and several other honors for his writings on race in America. Coates is one of the nation's most popular living chroniclers of the plight of African Americans. But despite that, he is acutely aware of his failings.

We Were Eight Years in Power is both a collection of Coates' best articles published by *The Atlantic* and criticism of those pieces. Prefacing most of the articles are short essays by Coates about the stage of life he was in when he wrote each article, the pieces' triumphs, and their flaws. With sometimes savage specificity, the essays map the evolution of Coates' writing skills as well as his personal foibles. At the same time, the articles themselves document the flaws of the United States and how the country consistently does wrong by its African-American citizens in favor

of doing more than right by its white citizens.

Coates' writing process is a metaphor for the social corrective he pursues: the abolishment of white supremacy. As a writer, Coates confronts on his laptop what he calls “the blank white page”—an area devoid of blackness except for a blinking cursor. With his words, he eliminates the page's identity

as a homogeneous space and partially carves away our nation's status as a place dominated by whiteness.

But there may not be a greater challenge to such a quest than the election of Donald Trump, whose campaign was endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan and whose presidency seems hell-bent on eviscerating the legacy of his predecessor, the first black president of a country that once enslaved Africans. For the egregious moral failing that is Trump's occupancy of the White House, Coates blames many people, including, surprisingly, himself.

“I am trying to remember that the best can happen to you in one moment and the worst can happen to your country in the next, and even still you can allow yourself to forget, get lost in your own story and forget that this really is chaos,” Coates writes as though he is a white liberal American who was shocked by Trump's win. “I think we all should have known better.” In *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Coates notes that he

and President Obama—two men whose job it was to keep their fingers on the pulse of America—failed to properly gauge Trump's chance of winning.

“The challenge of writing,” Coates said in a video for the MacArthur Foundation, “is to see your horribleness on page, to see your terribleness, and then to go to bed and wake up the next day and take that horribleness and that terribleness and refine it, and make it not so terrible and not so horrible.”

We Were Eight Years in Power is Coates' look at both his “terribleness” and the horribleness of our nation. He knows he can refine himself—his book is proof of his immense growth as a writer, from the start of his career to now—but it remains to be seen whether America's politics will also mature.

If racism is America's original sin, there is a lot of atoning our nation must do. Coates may be an atheist, but his good works point our country in the direction of a confessional. I hope America will step inside and own up to every wrong it has ever done. ■

Da'Shawn Mosley is assistant editor of Sojourners magazine.

Reviewed by Matthew Soerens

CALLED TO RADICAL WELCOME

***Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear*, by Matthew Kaemingk. Eerdmans.**

THROUGH MOST OF my career at World Relief, welcoming refugees has been a fairly easy “sell” to local churches: Refugees have sympathetic stories of fleeing persecution and legal status. I spent most of my energy persuading Christians that the same scripture passages that compel us to welcome refugees also apply to undocumented immigrants.

In recent years, I have observed a shift. The questions after I speak to church groups increasingly focus on Muslims. Aren't I concerned that Muslims will “take over” America? What percentage of refugees harbor terrorist sympathies? Was I aware, one man asked, that New York City was already under sharia law? (Fact check: It's not.)

We may have reached the point where refugees are as controversial as

undocumented immigrants. Certainly, many local churches do welcome refugees—and this relational proximity has disabused many Christians of misconceptions that all refugees are Muslim (among those resettled to the U.S., more are Christians) or that Muslims immigrants want to establish sharia as U.S. law. But evangelical churches that actively welcome refugees are in the minority. A Public Religion Research Institute poll finds that 74 percent of white evangelicals believe “the values of Islam are at odds with American values”—essentially, that Muslims cannot possibly become Americans. Six in 10 white mainline Protestants and white Catholics agree.

That’s why I highly recommend Matthew Kaemingk’s superb book *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear*. Kaemingk, a Fuller Theological Seminary professor, offers a “third way” of Western Christian engagement with Islamic immigration, eschewing both “the antagonism of right-wing nationalism [and] the romanticism of left-wing multiculturalism.”

Evangelicals tend to be suspicious of an approach to Islam that focuses primarily on the similarities between Christianity and Islam. Theologically conservative Christians and Muslims alike believe that there are critically important differences in our beliefs.

But too many evangelicals have swung to the other side—an equally or more unbiblical response—essentially approaching Muslims as enemies. Kaemingk’s argument is that evangelicals’ exclusive commitment to Christ’s authority over every aspect of our lives mandates “an uncompromising commitment to love those who reject that lordship.” It is *because* we are committed to distinctly Christian beliefs that we should welcome and defend the rights of Muslims.

Kaemingk uses the Netherlands as a case study. It went through a cultural shift some years ago that the U.S. seems to be experiencing now: from it being socially unacceptable to publicly voice Islamophobic sentiments to a time when anti-Muslim rhetoric wins elections.

The early 20th century Dutch prime minister and theologian Abraham Kuyper is at the center of Kaemingk’s case for a “Christian pluralism” that compels Christians to extend radical hospitality and stand for the rights of Muslims. Kuyper was

deeply committed to religious freedom for all—what “we want for ourselves we must not withhold from others!” he insisted. He strongly opposed efforts to establish religious hegemony, arguing that only Christ himself, not any church composed of his professed followers, was sovereign. Kaemingk challenges American evangelicals to adapt this approach: “As soon as evangelicals lay down their dreams of American cultural domination, they can pick up the more humble ... dream of American pluralism, justice, and respectful contestation.”

I have only two serious concerns with the book. First, it might have arrived too late: We needed this message a decade ago,

at least. And second, because it’s a thick, scholarly work, it’s not likely to be read by many of the people who most need its message. (The odds that the current occupant of the White House will engage Kuyperian theology are, I suspect, slim.) But that’s why I hope that you will read it, apply it by welcoming Muslim immigrants into your own life and community, and advocate for their rights and their well-being, both among fellow Christians and in the public square. ■

Matthew Soerens is the U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief and the co-author of Seeking Refuge: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis.

Reviewed by Gary M. Burge

AN APPEAL TO THE CENTER

***A Land Full of God: Christian Perspectives on the Holy Land*, edited by Mae Elise Cannon. Wipf & Stock.**

IMAGINE A gathering of thoughtful American Christians, of diverse backgrounds—from Greek Orthodox to Pentecostal—and each with some experience of the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. If you could record their conversations, it might be the beginning of the book that is here before us.

A Land Full of God is an essay collection compiled by Mae Elise Cannon, executive director of Churches for Middle East Peace, to show a range of opinions about the Israel-Palestine conflict in the American church. The writers share a general understanding that peacemaking is the only way forward. Some admit they are exhausted by this conflict. Many express despair over the extremist voices that seem to push the U.S. church around. And a few have suggestions for what might make a difference.

In one of the book’s liveliest essays, Paul Alexander sums up key points: 1) Israel must end its military occupation of the Palestinians and be less violent. 2) Palestinians need to recognize the state of Israel and stop vilifying Jews. 3) Christians



need to give a rest to appeals to eschatology in this entire mess. Alexander sounds exasperated and pragmatic, feelings many of us share.

If you’ve had much contact with this topic, it is impossible to read such a book with any neutrality. My own experience in this region began about 35 years ago and has continued unabated. It led to writing a lengthy historical-political book (*Whose Land? Whose Promise?* 2013) and one dealing with theology (*Jesus and the Land*, 2010). Like Alexander, I can despair at the intractability of some of the players. As is sometimes true in this book, many of us write or speak only to our constituencies and don’t listen to what the next person has to say. Or we speak from self-interest or a sense of ethnic entitlement. Fortunately, Cannon has gathered writers who at least try to listen and seek a third way beyond the dominant bimodal debate on this conflict.

Personal opinions and stories dominate the book, a limitation if you are looking for complex theological insight or careful historical or political discussion. These are reflections, often passionate reflections, about how to think differently. But

when theological reflection is found, it is limited to readings of the Bible that have real Zionist echoes (Judith Rood, Michael Brown, John E. Phelan Jr., Susan Michael). This really is fine. But I sought in vain for a theological presentation that might give these voices a run for their money, showing that a different theological take on the Bible is common. Several of these writers express sympathies for Palestinian suffering (Desmond Tutu, Paul Alexander, Bob Roberts, Andrea Smith), but none respond to those who claim a theological call for Israeli exceptionalism based on a reading of the Bible.

Some voices also seem to be missing. *A Land Full of God* offers centrist perspectives that could make you wonder what all the fuss is about, rather than strongly voiced

advocates on one side or the other. A helpful volume like this might be organized with strong Christian voices for Israel, strong Christian voices for Palestine, and centrist voices that can hear these other calls, critique them, and then plot a third way of peacemaking.

Nevertheless, Cannon has served us richly in this day of loud partisanship, where seemingly no opinion may be gently whispered, with this collection of Christians who bring wisdom, patience, hopefulness, and reason to an otherwise unreasonable situation. We need this tone for the Israel-Palestine conflict just as we need it in our U.S. national politics. ■

Gary M. Burge is visiting professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Reviewed by Anne Colamosca

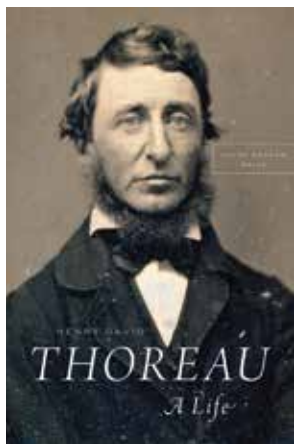
CRANK OR PROPHET?

Henry David Thoreau: A Life, by Laura Dassow Walls. The University of Chicago Press.

EVEN AFTER 200 years, Henry David Thoreau continues to be a controversial (and, to some, annoying) figure. In a 2015 *New Yorker* article titled “Pond Scum,” Kathryn Schulz eviscerates the 19th century author of *Walden*, describing him as “self-obsessed: narcissistic, fanatical about self control.”

Schulz is not alone in her criticism. In Thoreau’s own beloved village of Concord, Mass., he was attacked for being a hypocrite because he would slip away from his hand-built cabin in the woods to enjoy hot meals and drop off his laundry at the family home. This after he had brazenly declared himself self-sufficient. To make matters worse, he thundered against alcohol, gluttony, and sex in *Walden*, just as many were happily putting Puritanism behind them.

Yet Thoreau not only endures but is thriving in today’s 21st century zeitgeist. He has “come down to us in ice, chilled into a misanthrope prickly with spines,”



declares Laura Dassow Walls, author of a recently released biography, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*.

Walls writes of Thoreau set in a New England deep in the throes of change. Ever mindful of the worrisome new global economy, Thoreau sought out and wrote about those being left out and struggling. His subjects included Native Americans, Irish immigrants, and ex-slaves, who

were living precarious lives along Walden Pond. Perhaps his interest stemmed from the fact that, for years, Thoreau’s own extended family lived a life of penury, according to Walls, before the small pencil factory they ran in their backyard prospered, making them comfortable during Thoreau’s adult years.

On graduating from Harvard during the panic of 1837, Thoreau’s prospects dimmed. He quickly resigned from a promising teaching job because his conscience was so troubled after he reluctantly administered corporal punishment to students.

To support himself, he often worked as the town handyman. Eventually, he developed his talents as a surveyor, civil engineer, naturalist, lecturer, and author, though this took many years.

Thoreau’s most complicated relationship was with his longtime mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who alternately praised and emotionally lacerated the younger writer at particularly vulnerable times during Thoreau’s seesaw career. Thoreau “had come of age among a circle of radical intellectuals called ‘Transcendentalists,’” which had Emerson as their leader.

It was Thoreau’s mother, Cynthia, and his two sisters, Helen and Sophia, spearheading the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, that made him a ferocious supporter of the Underground Railroad. Upon returning to live in the family homestead, he joined his family in helping slaves escape to Canada. One cannot emphasize enough the deep horror Thoreau experienced when a runaway slave, Anthony Burns, “was marched in chains to the [Boston] harbor ... guarded by police with guns drawn, armed federal marshals, an artillery regiment, and three platoons of marines.” These events would propel him “into the most militant ranks of radical abolitionists.” In his famed essay “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau wrote that he could not support a government that “enslaves men, shoots Mexicans, and robs Indians.”

In an affectionate introduction to a bicentennial edition of *Walden*, environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote that Thoreau “was the American avatar in a long line that stretches back at least to Buddha, the line that runs straight through Jesus and St. Francis and a hundred other cranks and gurus.”

Walls’ vastly knowledgeable, emotionally generous, and novelistic book describes an endlessly curious, path-breaking New Englander who, until his death of tuberculosis at the age of 44, lived surrounded by a network of mostly affectionate friends and family, not as the loner he is often depicted to have been. ■

Anne Colamosca is a former staff writer at Business Week and has written for many national magazines and newspapers.

The Way of the Gun

THIRTEEN YEARS ago, on Holy Thursday, 9-year-old Donte Manning was shot around the corner from my house in Washington, D.C.

He died of his injuries four weeks later, on the Feast of Paschasius Radbertus, a ninth-century Benedictine theologian who wrote on intimacy between the body of Christ crucified and the real presence in the Eucharist. Donte's death impacted me deeply. (I wrote a book about his murder.)

Caught in the crossfire between neighborhood rivals, Donte Manning was the real body sacrificed on the altar of this imperial city where teenage boys shoot each other over \$200 Air Jordans and the Pentagon exports more than 1.45 million firearms to various security forces, just in Iraq and Afghanistan. (The Pentagon lost track of more than half of them.)

As theologian Ched Myers reminds, "Against the presence of Power is pitted the power of Presence: God with us."

Donte Manning's murder was never solved. It remains a cold

he volunteered as a basketball coach at the Boys and Girls Club. He knew the neighbors. He knew the players. And, though he doesn't remember it, he probably met Donte at the afterschool program.

Based on information Credle gathered during the investigation, he thinks he knows who pulled the trigger on that spring evening in 2005 and who that person was shooting at. "I believe we were close to making an arrest," Credle said in October.

But the arrest never happened. Why?

Because the gun involved in Donte's death belonged to a cop. That gun, according to an informant, was stolen from a deputy sheriff's car by one of the men suspected of shooting Donte Manning.

While D.C.-area police recover thousands of stolen guns (the ATF reports tracing approximately 2,000 weapons found in D.C. each year), more than 350 weapons were lost or stolen *from* those same police over the past six years. A few were stolen while properly stored, but many were left in cars or unsecured somewhere.

I don't know how many local police weapons were lost or stolen in 2005. But according to Credle, the weapon stolen from the deputy sheriff's car was recovered after the murder "three blocks from where Donte Manning was shot."

According to Credle, the gun was stolen from the deputy sheriff, then stolen again from the person who took it. These latter two came across each other outside Donte's apartment building and shot at each other from separate corners—apparently not caring that the



FOX 5 NEWS

Retired Washington, D.C. police detective Mitch Credle speaks to reporters about the unsolved murder of Donte Manning.

street between them was filled with little kids.

The guys in the shoot-out are both in prison for other things. "Based on all of the information that I gathered during the investigation, those are the two people who ... could bring some type of closure to this particular case, and one is doing 40 years-plus and the other one is doing life," the retired detective said.

GUNS HAVE ONE purpose: to kill. The Second Amendment has one purpose: to protect white domination over African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and people of color. Gun manufacturers have one purpose: profit. Criminals, cops, and civilians have guns for one purpose: power.

For all these reasons, I'm convinced that Christians must not use or own guns. Period. We wield the power of the real Presence instead and put all fear to submission under Christ. It's the only means to end the way of the gun. ■



Rose Marie Berger, a Sojourners senior associate editor, is a Catholic peace activist, poet, and author of *Who Killed Donte Manning: The Story of an American Neighborhood*.

The gun involved in Donte Manning's death belonged to a cop.

case. Mitch Credle, the investigating detective, retired from the D.C. Metropolitan Police. In October, he decided it was time to talk about his one unsolved murder. He was interviewed by local news reporter Paul Wagner.

"Every case that I have been involved in that particular neighborhood, an arrest was made without a problem," Credle told Fox 5 News in 2006, "and [Donte Manning's] is the only case that I have been involved in that neighborhood where an arrest has not been made yet."

Credle grew up in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. For years

Stories in Conversation

AS THE CHURCH wends its way through Lent, the last days of Jesus become the focus of the lectionary. The story of those days is hopelessly entangled with the story of the early church establishing and defining itself. One consequence of this is the habit of the Johannine gospel (John 2:13-22) to blame “the Jews” for all that befalls Jesus. Its authors are a long way from Mark’s portrait of a Torah-observant Jewish Jesus (Mark 14:3-9). And yet John 3:16 proclaims the love of God for the world; no sibling rivalry can stand in the face of that love. Similarly, Jesus announces that he will draw all people to himself in John 12:32.

The epistles emphasize that Christ calls *all*, non-Jews (lumped together under the moniker “the Greeks”) and Jews, in 1 Corinthians 1:18. The emphasis on God’s love and mercy in Ephesians 2:4 makes this reading especially suitable for Lent.

The readings from Hebrews and Philippians on the last two Sundays focus on a heavenly Christ who is exalted, in sharp distinction to the earthly Jesus betrayed and executed in the passion gospel.

This diversity of texts reveals Jesus through the different lenses of his faithful at varying points in the church’s story, inviting us to add our vision and voice to the telling of that story.

Wil Gafney is an associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas.



[MARCH 4]

Thou shalt...

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-2

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS spell out human responsibilities in the covenant between God and Israel, and subsequently to us, who have become party to that covenant. Not surprising, the commandments that pertain directly to God precede those that pertain to sister and brother human beings. The commandments are presented as being on the very lips of God. It is not clear whether God speaks through Moses or directly addresses the people. (In Exodus 20:18, the people witness the lightning, thunder, and smoke that accompany God’s speech and ask God not to speak to them, raising the possibility that they saw but had not heard or didn’t want to hear further.)

The foundation of the commandments is God’s identity expressed in God’s unutterable name and in God’s actions, liberating the Israelites from Egyptian slavery (20:1). Everything else flows from that. The Torah has both strictly monotheistic texts such as “there is no other besides God” in Deuteronomy 4:35 and henotheistic texts like those in Exodus 20. Henotheism is

worshipping one god above others.

The commandments pertain to all of Israel—and on occasion their slaves, animals, and immigrants among them—but are addressed to individual male subjects. The commandments are addressed to adults who can be bound by them. For example, honoring parents is about caring for elders, not teaching children to obey. Patriarchal hierarchy will characterize biblical Israel, while at the same time gender performances are more nuanced and complex, and the commandments presume the continuation of slavery.

The commandments are not as simple as they may appear. The injunction not to murder in verse 13 has famously been translated “Thou shalt not kill” in the King James Version. But, as Jeffrey H. Tigay observes in *The Jewish Study Bible*, there were many occasions on which killing was sanctioned in the Hebrew Bible. “Murder” is the preferable translation. Adultery was configured

differently for women than for men. A married woman could have no sexual partner except her husband, while her husband had access to other wives, slaves, and prostitutes without fear of the death penalty. The society the commandments envision is not ideal, yet together the commandments sketch out a community that respects boundaries and honors God.

[MARCH 11]

Miracles and Magic

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

ZAP THEM! There are times I long for a God who will zap certain people, similar to Zeus from Mount Olympus. Then I read texts in which God does (or threatens to do) just that, and I realize that is *not* a god I would choose. The Israelites are most often described as children, meaning “the children of Israel.” In Numbers 21, they are arguably bratty children. Parents in our world—which we project on to the biblical text, rightly or wrongly—are expected to respond to their bratty children with patience, love, respect, and nonlethal (and hopefully non-violent) discipline. But in the text, God zaps the bratty “children” with poisonous snakes.

Frankly, the Israelites have every reason to be bratty—make that terrified—non-compliant, and just human. They had just escaped slavery, and no one knew how long that would last. The world’s greatest army was on their track. They ate up their few

The events of the passion are set into motion because Jesus is dangerous.

provisions, went hungry and thirsty, and the solution was hitting a rock, scraping up something that was probably an insect by-product, and happening across the occasional flock of quail. They are hungry and frightened. And God zaps them.

This is a terrible story about parenting, human or divine. It is a useful reminder that there are significant differences between our world and the world of the text, and it is important that we not disregard them. This is also a meaning-making story. This

is a people's story preserving stories of their ancestors that had been passed down to account for the presence and worship of a bronze serpent in Jerusalem to the time of Isaiah, despite the prohibition against idolatry. (King Hezekiah destroyed the image in 2 Kings 18:4.) At one level, the story is intended to (further) stigmatize and delegitimize that worship.

What are we to make of something that looks like magic and idolatry? This passage reminds us that mystery and the miraculous are deeply embedded in our religious ancestry. This story is also a dramatic demonstration that sometimes people need to see the object of their faith, or a sacred item representing it. We long for iconography of one sort or another.

[MARCH 18]

A People Redeemed

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16;
Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

IT IS EASY FOR Christians to read the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 as the new relationship between God and humanity inaugurated by Jesus or as referring to the New Testament. It is certainly valid to see Jesus heralding a new relational paradigm. It is also important to read the Hebrew scriptures in their own context, to understand them as the gospel writers would have broadly understood them—even as they were expanding their understanding in light of Jesus.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is part of an extended promise in the full chapter to restore Israel, particularly Judah and Jerusalem, to wholeness in the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest and decimation. The promise includes rebuilding (verse 4), in-gathering exiles (verses 8-10), abundant harvest (verse 12), and restoration of the temple and its sacrifices (verse 14). This restoration is called the redemption of Israel (verse 11). Redemption is not personal salvation; it is national, in this instance and throughout the Hebrew scriptures.

What is new about the covenant in Jeremiah 31 is that it will be engraved on the hearts of God's people (here Israel and Judah in verse 33). It will not be like the previous covenant God made with their ancestors leaving Egypt (verse 32). The only difference



articulated is that the internal nature of the covenant means it will not need to be taught (verse 34). Jeremiah's rhetoric is not literal here. He is not saying that no one—Judean, Israelite, (or by extension Christians who read from their perspective)—will ever need religious instruction again. Indeed, he is not putting himself and other prophets out of business. Instead he is describing a world in which people who had lost everything were restored and thus had no need of anyone to teach them about God. They would know God for themselves through their own experience.

It is these values, the trustworthiness and power of God to redeem and restore, that the gospel evangelists saw as contiguous with the life and teaching of Jesus. In short, the book of Jeremiah does not so much predict Jesus (though it may), as it renders a portrait of the God whom Jesus incarnates.

[MARCH 25]

The Body of Jesus

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16;
Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1 - 15:47

THE PASSION SUNDAY reading in Mark does not include the familiar Palm Sunday parade. It chronicles the end of Jesus' mundane life, the emotionally charged days called "the passion," and continues through his death to his resurrection. There is value in just sitting with the passion, rather than rushing to the resurrection and risk neglecting the most sorrowful days on our calendar.

The events of the passion are set into motion because Jesus is dangerous. He is dangerous to the status quo, dangerous to

the *Pax Romana*, the peace (or suppressed resistance) that characterized Roman occupation. He is dangerous to those who have cast their lot with the empire. He is also dangerous to those who have cast their lot with him. It is that danger that leads Peter to deny Jesus (Mark 14:68-71). And that causes a young man to physically run away from Jesus and any association with him, running right out of his clothes (verses 51-52). Jesus is a marked man and has been for a while. Yet there are those who open their hearts and homes to him, such as Simon the leper and the woman who anointed Jesus (14:3-9).

Jesus' presence at Simon's table is gift and grace, hospitality offered and received at the margins of respectability. Jesus' body is in proximity to a man who has or had a communicable disease with religious implications. (In the Bible, as in life, characters are sometimes known by one thing, past or present, even when that's not who they are anymore.)

Jesus is also in bodily contact with a woman who is not a family member and not a slave or servant tasked with washing the feet of guests. There is no innuendo of her sinfulness here as in Luke (7:37). She will be mis-remembered in all four gospels—unnamed and misnamed (see Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8).

Jesus is also embodied as a Torah-observant Jewish man. His fidelity to his own Judaism demonstrates he is not at war with Jews or Judaism, his people, his faith. And it is this body that he offers to his disciples and to the world at the table and on the cross. ■

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

Corporations are People, and So are I

DEAR SIRs: (*I'm totally kidding. I'm sure you have a woman or two in the office—not in leadership, of course, but in important support roles.*)

This is to inform you that I, the undersigned, am changing my federal tax status. Beginning with tax year 2018, I will no longer be filing as “Married Filing Jointly” (or, as I’ve always wanted to do, “Married Filing Reluctantly and with an Attitude”). Instead, I’ll be filing as a “Major Corporation,” entitled to all the benefits and considerations therein. I realize this is a dramatic shift, but hear me out.

I have carefully followed the recent tax debate in Congress. (When I say “debate,” I mean “whis-



fondness for the letter “C,” since that was my grade point average in high school. (Alas, my GPA did not improve with the one A I earned, although that singular achievement in typing class *still* looks good on my résumé.)

The advantage of being a major corporation, of course, is that many don’t pay any taxes at all. Granted, the U.S. had one of the highest corporate tax rates in the world at 35 percent, but we major corporate types kind of giggle at that, since the highest rate mainly affects small family businesses who can’t afford paid representation in Congress. (On the other hand, small businesses *can* take consolation in maybe never having to bake for gay people again, depending on what Justice Kennedy reads in his horoscope that morning.)

IN SETTING UP my own major corporation, I’ve decided to follow the example of American Airlines, Hewlett-Packard, NewsCorp, Loews, and Xerox, some of the companies that paid no income taxes in 2015. Yes, they were profitable and should have contributed to the common good, but there are other ways to raise money for the needs of our nation. For example, children could hold bake sales to pay for asbestos removal in their schools, and seniors could wash cars to help earn their Medicare. Granted, old people in tankinis might not be the best image for patriotic burden-sharing, but

everybody needs to pitch in. And by “everybody” I mean the vast majority of Americans, the bottom 90 percent, to be specific.

It occurs to me that you might be skeptical of how my plan would make me a better citizen. But if you’ll permit me to explain:

- I don’t plan to manufacture any products, but neither will I pollute streams, fill the skies with soot, or contribute to the warming of our planet, unlike ExxonMobil, Chevron, or BP. (I’m not including Shell because they have cool ads.)

- I will have no employees, so I won’t be laying off thousands of them when I move my manufacturing outside the United States. Nor will I replace the workers I don’t have with robots or other technology. (I might get one of those little robot vacuum cleaners, however, because it’s so cute and the cat would hate it.)

- I will pay no salaries to the workers I won’t have, but neither will I pay unlivable wages, a practice followed by Walmart, whose employees often require public assistance to survive.

- I don’t expect to profit from any of the sales I won’t make, so I won’t be filing thousands of pages of tax documents for you to pore over. *Imagine how much time you’ll save!* Heck, I’ll just send you a postcard, although mainly on birthdays and Christmas.

I HOPE YOU approve my new status, since keeping most of my hard-earned corporate money meshes well with the tax plan the Republicans passed just before Christmas. It gave billions to the rich in hopes that a little would trickle down to the rest of us. Which really captured the spirit of the season: It is better to give after having received. ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

An open letter to the Internal Revenue Service.

pered conversations hidden from the public, although not necessarily behind closed doors, because special interests wouldn’t be able to fully contribute to the democratic process.”) In reading the new tax law, it occurred to me that I could better serve my own financial needs—as well as be a more patriotic citizen—if I took advantage of a classification normally reserved for industry. And since corporations are people and I, too, are a people, it seemed like the logical thing to do. (And with this new status, I might even become a *major* people. Fingers crossed.)

I’m not sure exactly what type of corporation I’ll become, and I hope you’ll fill out the forms for me, since I’m not a detail guy. I wouldn’t want to waste important Netflix time reviewing rules and regulations that Republican members of Congress rightly refer to as “onerous,” “burdensome,” and “bengazi.”

But I’m leaning toward one of those C corporations. I have a certain

Ken Davis



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